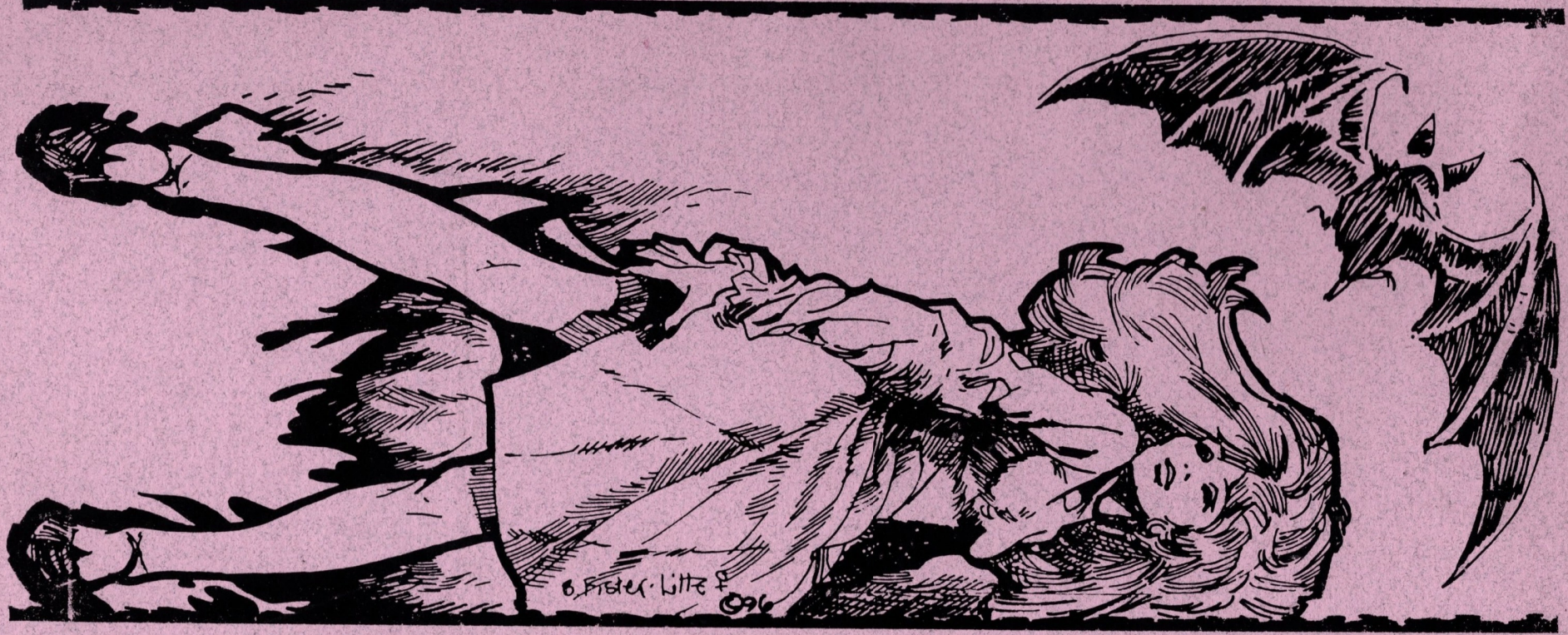
THE DEVIL YOU KNOW



R. A. Johnston

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by R. A. Johnston

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Chapter One

It was 10:00 P.M., and Nick wondered for the seventh time that evening why he decided to attend this madcap event on his day off. His sensitive ears cringed from the noise of the several hundred people attending the Toronto Renaissance Festival, all in various stages of intoxication, and most of them quite loud. The air was redolent of sausages, roasted ears of corn, and beer, all overpoweringly unpleasant to a vampire's sense of smell. His impulse to attend this event had been sparked by the promise of some madrigal singing, and with his fondness for old European music, he had been unable to resist the opportunity. He had unfortunately forgotten that there were other aspects to a festival like this, such as an excuse to party.

The musicians and singers were just now setting up, and Nick doubted they would be heard over the din of the crowd. He leaned against a vacant refreshment stall and watched the proceedings with less than full attention. Then he straightened abruptly. He felt the vampire's presence even before he materialized in front of Nick.

Nick faced the platinum haired master vampire who had brought him over. Ever since he had seen LaCroix this past Father's Day, the older vampire had become even more determined to lure Nicholas back to his old life. Nick had returned the gift LaCroix had given him many years ago, a watch with the word **Forever** engraved in it, symbolizing the amount of time LaCroix intended to spend with Nicholas. Nick had returned it as a Father's Day gift, but told LaCroix that he would not return to him. Not that LaCroix paid any attention to that statement.

Nick stared at his 'father' and mentor. It was a complicated relationship at best, and Nick wavered between guilt, awe and reluctant caring for the vampire who had created him. And fear; that too was a reflex response whenever he faced LaCroix. Nick thought fleetingly of the various moments in the past when he had attempted to defy the older vampire, and he swallowed convulsively. The master vampire was more powerful, determined and obstinate than Nick could ever hope to be, and that made LaCroix a very dangerous being to cross. Nick had even thought he had killed LaCroix over Alyce Hunter, but LaCroix had returned. LaCroix could afford to be patient. After all, he had all of eternity to bring Nicholas back into the fold. LaCroix was subtler now in his approach, but no one could mistake his intentions. Even now, with their agreement that LaCroix would not interfere with his mortal lifestyle, Nick was still wary of him.

The older vampire smiled blandly at Nick. "Good evening, Nicholas. Out enjoying a little cultural nightlife?" Nick forced himself to mask his fleeting thoughts, but not before the older vampire glimpsed them in his eyes.

"Nicholas, I'm surprised at you. Don't I always have your best interests at heart?" The master vampire's smile widened as he shook his head in mock sorrow.

"Why are you here, LaCroix? I didn't think this was your type of thing."

"On the contrary, Nicholas, I am interested in everything that you do, to one degree or another."

Nick stared at LaCroix with a mixture of curiosity and frustration. LaCroix never did anything on impulse, and he always was looking for something to gain. What was here that would attract him? Or did LaCroix have another agenda in mind?

LaCroix leaned back against the stall next to Nicholas and watched the minstrels make last minute preparations for the concert. Nick wasn't fooled by the casual posture, and he remained tense and alert. Whatever it was that LaCroix wanted, Nick had no doubt it would be something Nick did <u>not</u> want. Nick briefly considered leaving, then discarded the idea when he saw the determination on the older vampire's face. LaCroix would only drag him back like an errant schoolboy, and Nick was in no mood to be treated like a child. Nick's thoughts showed clearly on his face, and LaCroix chuckled slightly.

"But you are, you know," he said to Nick as the instrument tuning began. "You are my child, <u>my</u> creation, and I never will let you forget that." With those slightly ominous words he turned to watch the musicians. Nick seethed quietly, but made no attempt to escape. What good would it do?

The musicians were young and enthusiastic despite the late hour. They were good; they played and sang a number of ballads and madrigals. Nick enjoyed the music with the wry knowledge that he had met some of the composers. Then came the time for some audience requests, as the crowd had thinned and became more orderly. These were the few serious music buffs. The musicians approached the two vampires. Then Nick saw her standing there in medieval dress costume; she turned her head to something a companion musician had said, and Nick was inundated with a haunting feeling of familiarity. Where had he seen her before? She reminded him of...then the feeling vanished as she turned to face him; she was a stranger. She was tiny, perhaps only five foot one or two, and slender. Her face was a pale oval beneath an intricate hairstyle that bound up her long black hair. Objectively, Nick would have to say that she was quite lovely, but when she smiled, Nick glimpsed the bleakness in her eyes. *Someone else with dark secrets*, he thought. No one that young should have eyes so empty.

She sang a solo piece in a clear soprano that would have been the envy of any choir boy, and Nick was startled by LaCroix's comment on the young woman whose solo had transported him far away. LaCroix smiled. "She's quite good, isn't she, Nicholas?"

Nick felt the bitterness rise up in him, drowning out her voice. He recalled another group of musicians, long ago in England, and how one had fallen prey to Janette. Trust LaCroix to know just what buttons to push to shake him out of the illusion that his life could be normal again.

Nick stared at LaCroix. "What do you want from me, LaCroix? I said I won't come back to you."

LaCroix watched him with that maddeningly calm half-smile, the one that could mean anything from anger to amusement. "As it happens, I bring you some news that may be of interest to you. I think I may have found the descendants of Fleur's illegitimate offspring."

Nick reeled from that tidbit of information. Fleur had been Nicholas' sister, and LaCroix had fallen in love with her hundreds of years ago. He had wanted to bring her across so that he could keep her forever, but Nicholas had stopped him. After LaCroix had reluctantly agreed to leave Fleur untouched despite his feelings for her, he had vowed that Nicholas would pay in kind. He had nearly called in that revenge when Nick declared his love to Natalie. Nick had convinced LaCroix that she was merely trying to help him regain mortality and stated he was encouraging her infatuation for him to achieve that end. Nick had regretfully erased any memory of their budding relationship from Natalie's mind, and settled back with the sorrowful knowledge that perhaps he would lose her, too, like the handful of other women he had loved, or who had loved him, over the centuries.

Fleur had forgotten LaCroix under Nicholas' hypnotic suggestion, but obviously had retained some memory, for she never married. She ran away two years after that fateful meeting, and was found nine months later in a nearby town, dead after childbirth.

Nick recalled the look on LaCroix's face when he heard that Fleur was dead. For several brief, unguarded moments, LaCroix had grieved. He never thought that the older vampire was capable of the sorrow he had seen that day.

They stared at the pitiful body lying on the dirty bed, a pool of blood around her. Fleur's eyes were open, and dead. LaCroix reached out to touch her neck with a shaking hand, then realized that the necklace was gone.

"Where is it?" he hissed to the old woman. "Where is the chain that she wore?"

The old woman stammered, "She put it on the baby, my lord, she wanted the baby to keep it because she knew she was dying."

"And the child?" Nicholas demanded, his heart sick with worry.

"Gone, my lord. There were people looking for a child, and the girl had just died."

"So you sold it, just like a sack of flour, after you let this woman die," LaCroix said in a deceptively soft purr, advancing toward the old hag who backed away from fearfully.

"Where is the child?" he repeated, his eyes locking with hers, forcing the old woman to respond.

"They came from the north, but they did not say their names."

It was pitifully little to go on, and LaCroix broke his mental hold on the old woman as his fangs extended.

"Now you pay for your treachery, crone."

The fangs slashed, and soon her lifeless body hit the floor. LaCroix turned back to the body on the bed, where Nicholas was gently folding his sister in a blanket.

Nicholas was stricken, but when he looked at LaCroix's face, he knew that not even his sorrow at this outcome could match what the master vampire was feeling. Nicholas locked glances with LaCroix, felt the elder's pain, and closed his eyes.

"We must see to her burial, LaCroix. I would not see her in the pauper's grave."

LaCroix was silent for a long time, his hand touched the soft hair of the dead woman, then seemed to collect himself. "Yes, Nicholas, you are undoubtedly right. I will find what became of the child, Nicholas. If I search for the next thousand years, I will find out."

Nicholas cradled his burden closer. "I don't even know what the child was," he said sadly.

"A girl," Janette told him softly. "The old woman said it was a girl."

"And the father?" Nicholas wanted to know, as Janette had arrived before either of the other vampires.

"He is a soldier, I believe. He frequents the tavern down the street."

LaCroix's lips clenched tightly. "I will find him and destroy him."

"No, LaCroix, she was my sister! I claim that right!"

The master vampire turned to Nicholas, his fury palpable. "And she was my love, that I foolishly gave up at your insistence. If I had brought her across, this would have never happened!"

Nicholas buried his face in Fleur's hair, then mumbled, "I don't know that your way would have been kinder than this."

LaCroix gave him a measured look, then strode out of the room, Janette close behind. Nicholas found the undertaker, and with some coins made arrangements for the body to be sent to the family crypt. He knew that he had to tell his mother that her daughter was dead and he dreaded it. When LaCroix and Janette returned a short while later, he did not need to ask what had happened. The savage satisfaction on LaCroix's face told it all.

"He's dead?" Nicholas asked unnecessarily.

"Yes, Nikola. It was most puzzling that she would choose a common soldier, until I saw his face. He looked enough like LaCroix to be his brother."

"She was looking for you, LaCroix. That's why she ran away," Nick said quietly. "I never thought she would remember."

LaCroix was trying to control his rage, still seething after the kill. Then he turned to Nicholas. "I would have cherished her, Nicholas, despite what you think of this existence. I would have loved her."

Nicholas had no answer, and in a rare moment of shared empathy, he put his arms around LaCroix, who stood stiff and silent in the embrace. Nicholas let his arms fall, and turned away from the obvious rejection. He moved to walk out,

as it was clear that LaCroix wanted nothing to do with him. There was nothing he could do to ease his mentor's pain.

Nick was aware that LaCroix had been searching for Fleur's child, and as the centuries passed, Fleur's descendants, but could never guess LaCroix's motive in doing so. Was it guilt over her untimely death, anger over losing her, or perhaps something a bit more unselfish, like love?

"Why is it so important to you, LaCroix?"

LaCroix smiled enigmatically. "Let's just say I have some unfinished business with your family, Nicholas. I'm sure you will want to meet these descendants of yours, so I will let you know once I am certain. It should be an interesting reunion."

He stared at the older vampire. "What do you gain from this, LaCroix? You never did explain why it was so important that you find Fleur's child."

LaCroix's answer was cryptic. "Everything, and nothing. You're not the only one who has a fascination for some ancient legends."

Nick was confused. The only ancient legends he had explored lately were the Mayan cups from the museum. They had been linked to a ceremony that supposedly was a cure for vampirism. That and the mystical Abourathe, with its list of cures for curses. LaCroix had destroyed both of them, but did he now want to return to humanity?

LaCroix smiled at that thought, easily reading the younger vampire's face. "No, no, Nicholas. I have no desire to grow old and die. There are other legends that interest me. Ones that deal with immortality."

Nick was left with the frustrated feeling that he had just missed something important.

They again focused on the musicians as they played and sang. LaCroix watched with intense eyes. "They're very young, and the young have much sweeter blood..."

Nick interrupted the older vampire's musing as he grabbed LaCroix's shirt and spun the taller vampire to face him. Spurned on by his memories, he lashed out.

"No, LaCroix! By God, you'll not do this! Not with another innocent life just to teach me a lesson!"

LaCroix's eyes blazed and he dropped Nicholas to the ground with one blow. Luckily they were in the shadows and the scuffle went unseen by mortal eyes. Nick's head spun from the blow as he realized too late that he had forgotten just how strong his mentor was. LaCroix then hauled him up and set him back on his feet.

"Now you listen to me, my young friend, before I decide to really do you some damage! Whatever I choose to do, you will abide by. If I decide to feed, you cannot stop me, and if I decide that you'll come back to me, you will do that. You will never be able to fight me and win!"

That statement brought back memories for Nick that he would rather not face again. The master vampire's leniency of late had made Nick less cautious. He should have known that LaCroix would twist any situation to his own purposes, one moment indulgent, the next...

It had not been too many months after Fleur's death that things had come to a boiling point. LaCroix had been withdrawn and bitter, and both Nicholas and Janette had treaded very lightly around him, unwilling to incur his wrath. LaCroix had grown even more cruel in his nightly feedings. He was always one who savored the hunt and the kill, the terror of his intended victim, and the anticipation of the chase, but now he almost casually had descended to torturing his victims. He prolonged their agony and terror with dispassionate calm. LaCroix pushed Nicholas into committing ever crueler acts, enjoying how Nicholas protested, argued and, ultimately, obeyed. Nicholas hated LaCroix for what he was doing to both Janette and himself. He appeared to gain pleasure in pushing Nicholas into corners, taunting him with barely disguised anger. Then the night came when LaCroix had herded a few scruffy-looking youngsters into the house that they occupied.

LaCroix smiled at the disapproving look Nicholas gave him.

"See, Nicholas. The orphanages are quite accommodating. A few coins will buy almost anything. Love, companionship, food."

The children stood still, their eyes wide and terrified. The oldest was a boy of about twelve. The younger boy looked about nine and the girl perhaps five or six. Babies. Nick opened his mouth to protest, and was silenced by one glance from LaCroix.

"You must feed, Nicholas. I order you to take what is yours."

Nick stiffened, aware of Janette's hungry glance and felt his own canines extending in anticipation. Their frantic little hearts beat a syncophy of hot blood. Their fear was making Nicholas dizzy with blood lust. He shook his head in negation, trying to control the impulses that raged in him.

"I won't, LaCroix. You know I will never kill a child. Never again."

LaCroix smiled in genuine amusement, his grip on the younger boy unbreakable. He stroked the young neck with a cool fingertip, his caress almost obscene. The child stood as if rooted to the floor, unable to move or think, bound by his terror of the tall vampire who held him immobile.

"Are you disobeying me, Nicholas?" The question was very soft and chilling in its intensity. Until now, Nick had yielded to him, more or less. This, however, was something that Nick would not do.

LaCroix eyed his young companion, reading the rebellious defiance in his eyes. He then bent down and slashed into his young victim's neck, as the child flopped uselessly, his fear adding a potent flavoring to his blood. Soon the child sagged lifelessly in LaCroix's arms. His smile was mocking, "They don't make much of a meal, do they, Nicholas? But for a midnight snack..."

Nicholas stood as if rooted to the ground, for a moment unable to do anything but look at the boy in horror. The puncture wounds in the boy's throat and the blood on LaCroix's mouth sent rage through Nicholas, freeing his limbs as he flew at his mentor. It was a short bitter fight, as Nicholas was hopelessly outmatched, and soon he lay pinned to the floor, helpless against LaCroix's superior strength.

Nicholas attempted to free himself, and earned a sharp blow to the head that dazed him. LaCroix stared at him through narrowed eyes. "You dare raise a hand to me?!"

With that the elder vampire pulled Nicholas to his feet and held him helpless in a bone crushing grip. He stared furiously at Nicholas as Janette approached the pair cautiously. The two other children escaped unnoticed by the vampires.

"You obviously need to be taught a lesson in obedience, Nicholas. No father would tolerate this from his children. You will be punished." LaCroix looked almost maniacal in his anger.

Nicholas shuddered at LaCroix's words, helpless fear uncoiling inside him. Janette's eyes met his in stricken silence. She could not help him. LaCroix dragged Nicholas with him as they headed down into the cellar. He pushed Nicholas up against the wall. Nicholas swallowed the lump in his throat, the thought of the boy, and turned his face away from the master vampire. He was turned forcibly back to look at LaCroix. Pinned there against the wall, the extent of LaCroix's fury washed over Nicholas in an icy blast. Nicholas' terror was plainly visible in his eyes, and LaCroix savored it. "Yes, Nicholas, you fear me now like you did at the very beginning. I won't take your life, but by the end you may well wish I had!"

LaCroix's eyes were once more opaque and watchful. The anger had left them, and he dusted off his companion's shoulder as Nicholas grimaced and straightened his shirt. The older vampire's anger had left as quickly as it came. That, too, was an unpleasant reminder of past experiences, this mercurial temperament of his mentor.

Nick forced himself away from that unpleasant memory as LaCroix's gaze then settled on a pretty red haired girl who approached them with a smile. She was one of the group of musicians, and the others followed quickly. The familiar one, a dark haired girl who couldn't be more than seventeen or eighteen seemed to stand a bit apart from the group. She was about Fleur's age, when her life had been cruelly snuffed out.

The redhead smiled at both Nick and LaCroix, delighted to have two handsome gentleman paying attention to their music. "Gentleman, any song requests? The only rule is that it must be more than a hundred years old!"

"Not unlike some vampires we know," LaCroix murmured sotto voce, earning a warning glance from Nick, who was trying to deflect LaCroix's interest in them as a potential meal. The dark-haired young woman wouldn't meet their eyes, although she made a credible show of participating in the group. When Nick

caught her eye and forced her to keep his gaze, he almost recoiled from the darkness he glimpsed. What had put that look in her eyes? LaCroix met the girl's eyes and shifted her focus to himself. LaCroix looked as if he recognized her as well, and he smiled secretively. Then the spell was broken as LaCroix turned to the red-haired teenager and turned on his charisma. "Your name, fair lady?"

The girl's eyes sparkled. "Laurel," she answered, charmed by both his manners and his exquisite accent. British men just made her weak in the knees.

"I would like to hear you play something about the night. I have always loved the night." He ignored the strangled gasp Nick made at that comment.

Laurel frowned thoughtfully. "That limits the possibilities, but I am a music major, after all." She conferred with her fellow musicians in whispers, then her eyes lit up. "I know, the perfect song. It's by Johann Strauss II. It's a lullaby from *Indigo and the 40 Robbers*. It has new lyrics now, and it's called *Musik der Nacht* (Music of the Night)*. That should qualify as an old enough song for this festival."

Nick couldn't help smiling a bit at that. He remembered the tune, if not these modern lyrics, a legacy of the time he had spent in Vienna.

Laurel gestured to the musicians. "Come on, guys, we have a request!" She turned back to Nick and LaCroix. "Arielle will sing this one, she's got the best voice, even though she's not at university yet." The girl named Arielle began to sing, and even LaCroix seemed to fall under her spell. The music was an achingly lovely tribute to the night as a reminder of the singer's true love.

Musik der Nacht	*Music of the night*
raubt mir den Schlaf.	*robs me of sleep*
Bilder von damals,	*Pictures from the past*
als ich dich traf	*of the time I met you,*
Tanz unter Sternen,	*Dancing beneath the stars*
Strassenlaternen.	*and streetlights.*
Wortlose Sehnsucht	*Wordless longing*
wieder erwacht.	*stirs again,*
Ertraeumt und erdacht	*dreamt and remembered*
wie Musik der Nacht.	*like music of the night.*
Der Wind der Nacht, so	*The wind of the night*
leis', so sacht,	*so soft, so gentle,*
traegt Lieder her	*carries songs to me,*
sehnsuchtschwer.	*filled with longing.*
Raunendes Schweigen,	*Rustling silence,*
Laub in den Zweigen.	*leaves on the branches,*
Mut der mich treibt,	*courage to drive me,*
Hoffnung die bleibt.	*hope to sustain me.*

Musik der Nacht	*Music of the night*
raubt mir den Schlaf.	*robs me of sleep:*
Bilder von damals,	*Pictures from the past*
als ich dich traf	*of the time I met you,*
Tanz unter Sternen,	*Dancing beneath the stars*
Strassenlaternen.	*and streetlights.*
Wortlose Sehnsucht	*Wordless longing*
wieder erwacht.	*stirs again,*
Ertraeumt und erdacht	*dreamt and remembered*
wie Musik der Nacht	*like music of the night*
Musik der Nacht.	*Music of the night.*
Musik der Nacht.	*Music of the night*

*Music by Johann Strauss II German text by Michael Kunze
(Trans. R.A. Johnston)

Arielle finished the song on a bare whisper, and everyone around her, including the curious who had stopped to watch, was silent. Then a wave of appreciative applause started and grew. LaCroix smiled slightly and thanked the musicians. "It was a lovely song. Perhaps a bit too peaceful for my taste, but then again, Nicholas always was more the sentimental type."

Nick looked exasperated, but added his thanks to that of LaCroix.

Arielle said nothing, her eyes solemn, but Laurel smiled pertly at the fascinating gentleman and asked, "And you're not, sir?"

LaCroix's eyes took on a far away look. "Perhaps I was once, a long time ago. But that's ancient history."

Laurel, merry little bubble-head that she was, missed the shadows in LaCroix's face, but Arielle did not. She looked troubled, her eyes meeting LaCroix and Nicholas for the first time of her own volition. She spoke only once. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

LaCroix was startled out of his usual cool, and said, "Nonsense, it was just a memory that comes to the surface now and again. You had all best get home. The others have already left and it's late."

Laurel giggled, "I know, I know, you never know what's prowling around the streets at night."

You don't know the half of it, Nick thought, as he watched them hurry away. His gaze lingered on the girl called Arielle.

"She has a great deal of darkness, the young one who sang, doesn't she?" LaCroix commented as he watched Arielle's departure with brooding eyes. He was lost in thought. Then he turned to Nick, clasping his shoulder briefly in a gesture that was more possessiveness than camaraderie. "I must be going. I must see if my hunch about your family is right. I'll be in touch."

With that he levitated out of sight, and Nicholas was left in an abandoned fairground, lost in his own thoughts as he headed back to his Caddy. Something bad was going to happen. He knew it in the depths of his vampire heart.

Arielle walked away with her companions, but she did not participate in their excited chatter. Her long dark hair swung free now, impossibly thick for such a small face. It was the only thing about her that seemed to radiate any vitality.

"You did great, Arielle! Did you see how those two guys latched onto you when you sang?" one of the musicians commented.

Arielle gave the speaker a shy smile, but said nothing. The others were fond of her, as she was a sweet person who never had an unkind word for anyone, but she was almost impossible to get to know. She had a voice that they could only dream of possessing, and yet they had yet to hear more than a few sentences from her. They had watched in fascination as she entranced the two handsome strangers.

"Will you be at rehearsal next week, Arielle?" This from Laurel, who had finally stopped bubbling. Arielle hesitated, knowing that she had risked enough just coming to the festival tonight. Her eyes were shadowed as she shrugged noncommittally. Laurel gave up, knowing that nothing would persuade the solemn-faced young woman to speak what was really on her mind. Laurel wondered what her life was like at home, to make her so quiet. Her parents must be really strict with her, she concluded. They reached the parking lot, and Laurel turned to Arielle. "Come on, Arielle, I'll give you a ride home."

Arielle shook her head. "No thanks, Laurel. It's not far to walk."

"You heard what those guys said, Arielle. It's not safe after dark!"

Arielle gazed at the lights of the city street, and then above to the sky, which was cold and clear. "I'll be fine, Laurel. Thanks anyway."

Laurel watched Arielle walk away with half amusement and half frustration, Did she have death wish to take chances like this? She got into her car, watching Arielle's figure disappear into the distance, oblivious to the noise on the city streets, alone and untouchable.

Chapter Two

Nick and Schanke were at the local emergency department following up a lead on a gang member who had managed to get himself knifed in a particularly nasty showdown with a rival gang that had left two people dead. Whether it was for drugs or power, the senseless violence continued. At least an innocent bystander had not been shot, and no drive-by shootings had been reported of late. For that, Schanke was grateful. It had been bad enough when the little girl had been shot several months ago, and the actress who forced her way into a ride-along with them while filming her latest cop thriller had managed to get Schanke's snitch killed.

Nick was trying to tune out the misery prevalent in a big inner city emergency department. The rampant emotions of psychological and physical suffering threatened to overwhelm him. Feelings were intensified here to the point where he could almost read individual thoughts, and underneath them he felt the frantic pumping of mortal hearts, and the sweet smell of blood. It made Nick dizzy for a moment, as his hunger grew. With tremendous force of will he leashed it to concentrate on the information that Schanke was coaxing out of the reticent gang member as the physician and nurse looked on in exasperation.

As Schanke alternately cajoled and threatened the sullen young man lying on the stretcher getting his arm sutured, Nick's eyes wandered around in idle curiosity. Then he straightened abruptly as he recognized a fragile-looking girl who sat in one of the wheelchairs since all the beds were full. She looked as though she had been beaten. Her left eye was bruised and swollen shut, and dried blood crusted from her nose and from a cut on her lip. She cradled her right wrist protectively, and Nick could tell it was broken by the deformity. When her dark eyes met Nick, the recognition was immediate. It was Arielle.

She wondered why the man was watching her, then looked away, ashamed to let anyone see her in this condition. His decision made, Nick walked over to the girl, who seemed even more fragile than the last time they met. He smiled. "Hello again. Arielle, isn't it? I remember your singing from the fair. It looks as though you've been in a nasty accident."

Only then did she recognize the man from the fair. He and his pale older companion had listened intently to the song she had sung, and had seemed moved by it. It was one of her few happy memories of late. She looked away, unable to respond to the kindness in his eyes. He approached her, and when she noticed the large male form leaning over her, she threw up her good arm to shield her face, unconsciously trying to defend herself. Nicholas felt as though somebody had struck him instead. He hastened to reassure her. "No, it's okay," he soothed. "I'm just making sure you're all right. My name is Nick Knight. I'm a detective with the Metro Police Department."

She lowered her arm, feeling both foolish and frightened. *Stupid idiot*, she told herself, *he wasn't going to hit you!*

"What happened to you?" Nick asked softly, keeping a respectable distance to avoid spooking her. She tightened her lips and shook her head.

"Somebody hurt you, didn't they?"

"I fell down the steps," she stated in a dull monotone, obviously a phrase she had used many times before.

"You don't have to be afraid, you know. If somebody did this to you, we can help you, get you to a safe place."

She knew that she could not tell him anything. The consequences were too great. "I fell down the steps," she repeated and would not elaborate.

Nick's eyes bore into hers, and she felt herself looking in the blue depths. It made her head feel muzzy. "Who did this to you, Arielle?"

She thought vaguely that he was doing something to her head, he was asking something that she should not tell. Confused, she stared at him, trying to pull away from that magnetic gaze. The spell was broken when the serious young emergency physician returned to report on her X-rays.

"Arielle, your face is okay, but you definitely broke your wrist and it will have to be reduced and casted by our orthopedist."

Nick broke off his gaze with frustration. He had been so close to an answer. The doctor eyed the leather-jacketed young man dubiously, "Friend or family?"

"Nick Knight, Metro P.D.," He introduced himself with a firm handshake and displayed his badge, dispelling the suspicion in the doctor's eyes. "I just came over to check on how Arielle was doing."

The doctor shook his head sadly, motioning him to the side. "You obviously know her. Are you investigating this matter, officer?" he said in a voice low enough that Arielle wouldn't hear him.

"Not officially, no, but I'll bet anything these injuries were deliberately inflicted."

"Look, technically I can't discuss this with you because of patient confidentiality, but I'm very concerned about her. She refuses to say anything other than that she fell down the stairs. I can't force her to cooperate with the police; she's legally an adult. But I wish you could persuade her to confide in someone. This is the fifth time in two years she's been seen for suspicious injuries. Every time we try to help or intervene, she disappears. One of these days she'll end up in the coroner's office. Perhaps you might have better luck talking with her."

"I'll see what I can do."

Nick wandered back to Schanke, who was wrapping up with the young gang member, and spoke briefly, "Can I catch you later, Schanke? Something came up that I have to follow through with."

Schanke looked at his partner with an expression of long suffering tolerance. "Oh sure, Knight. Just like every other time, old Don Schanke gets left out of the loop while Nick Knight chases down some wild lead. At least you didn't leave me stranded in your car in the middle of the street this time!"

"It's important, Schank, otherwise I wouldn't ask."

"Okay, okay, I'll head back to the station and start the paperwork. I'll catch a ride with Rodriguez."

"Thanks, Schanke, I owe you."

"You owe me more than a few, Knight. Catch ya later!"

With that Schanke left the treatment area, allowing Nick to head back to Arielle, who had been moved to a bed in the cast room. The nurse had cleaned her face as best she could, and the orthopedist, a hyperkinetic little man, was injecting Arielle's wrist with a local anesthetic to numb the area around the broken bone. Arielle's face was white with pain, but she didn't make a sound.

know I can't refuse a request like this. She can stay in one of the booths in the back, perhaps try to rest a bit."

With that she turned to smile at the frail young woman. "I'm Janette, and as Nikola is one of my oldest friends, I will gladly help a friend of his. You may stretch out on the bench and rest. I'll have someone bring you some ice for your face. Would you like something to drink? Non-alcoholic, of course!"

Arielle murmured her thanks, fascinated by the lady's dark beauty. She had the same indefinable quality that Nick and his older male companion had. Something otherworldly. Nick turned to her, and held her gaze for a while. He handed her a card.

"If you change your mind, Arielle, just call me. I'll do anything to help you, but you have to want to stop the problem first. I would hate to see your beautiful singing go to waste."

Arielle looked him square in the face for the first time that night. "Thank you for everything, Detective Knight, but sometimes it's too late. There are things that..." She hesitated briefly, then rushed on, "Sometimes we don't have a choice in what we have to do." With that she walked back to the padded bench with a solicitous waitress who helped her stretch out and fashioned an icepack for her face.

Nick watched her in the distance, reflecting on what she had said. Oh yes, he knew what she meant as he recalled the things he had done in the past, the things that he had suffered to spare someone else pain. Sacrifice was a terrible personal choice to make.

Janette interrupted his thoughts. "She has darkness inside."

"Yes," he answered. "Yet she sings like an angel."

"I wonder who did this to her."

Nick frowned. "Her stepfather. And she won't do anything to stop it." Then he sighed deeply. "I don't want her to end up dead, Janette. I can't just abandon her."

Janette gave him a commiserating glance. "Trying to save the world from itself again, my dear Nikola. She's not a child to be rescued from the monsters under the bed. You do play the gallant knight to excess."

"I have to leave, Janette. Duty calls. Please watch out for her."

Janette sighed and nodded in agreement. "I will arrange to have a taxi take her to where she would like to go in the morning. For at least one night she will be safe."

Janette watched Nick leave the club with concern. He always had a weakness for helpless damsels in distress, like the young artistic model who had poisoned herself after 'allowing' herself to be raped by the painter she had posed for. Nick was still trying to save his sister after all these years.

Janette straightened abruptly as she sensed a powerful presence enter the club. The tall pale vampire with the silvery hair approached her silently, and she

nodded graciously. It would do no good to pretend with him. He was well aware of the fear he could raise in his children.

"LaCroix," she greeted him with her raised wine glass.

"Janette," he returned the greeting coolly. "Wherever did our Nicholas disappear to?"

She smiled tightly. "He had business to finish, police business."

LaCroix smiled. "Nicholas and his little make-believe game with humanity. I will find him later. Where is the girl, Janette?"

She blinked, debating whether to avoid the question, but the pale blue eyes boring into hers sent a shiver of dread down her spine. She knew she could not cross him. How was he connected to the child? Or was this just another of LaCroix's many ploys used to attempt to lure Nikola back to him?

"She's resting in the back, but she's been hurt..."

"Oh, I'm well aware of that. I followed Nicholas from the hospital, after questioning the emergency doctor. I'm afraid he became another victim of an parking lot mugging. A pity, he was very good at what he did."

Janette shivered again. "What do you have in mind for this mortal, LaCroix? You obviously know Nikola has appointed himself her protector. Are you planning to punish him again for leaving you?"

"On the contrary, Janette, Nicholas has not really left me, and neither have you. You are both living your lives by my allowance. If I chose, you would cease to exist, or you would fall to my feet to do my bidding."

Janette looked away, her normal cool unflappability badly shaken. How could she forget the power he held over Nikola and her? Just because he had been tolerant of late didn't mean he was any less in control.

LaCroix felt her rising fear and reveled in it.

Janette, who could generally care two figs for humanity except as a food source, felt angry. Whatever he had planned, LaCroix would hurt Nikola. "He cares for her, LaCroix, don't ask me why."

LaCroix smiled. "That is unfortunate, as I have plans for her."

"So you will kill this mortal, and for what? To prove a point to Nikola?"

LaCroix shrugged. "Perhaps I shall, perhaps not."

Janette watched the glitter in the master vampire's eyes uneasily. She could not stop him, that much was clear. She tentatively put a gloved hand on LaCroix's arm.

"Please, LaCroix, don't hurt him."

LaCroix considered that briefly, then displayed his devastating smile, the one with ten million candlepower charisma. "I'll consider it, Janette." Then he walked with unerring accuracy toward the bench where Arielle lay sleeping. Janette watched him, and sipped her 'wine'. It was now out of her hands. Perhaps LaCroix would end this little one's suffering more completely than any human justice Nick intended to enforce.

Arielle lay still. Exhaustion had claimed her in a troubled slumber. She woke with a start, suddenly aware of another presence. She gazed up to see a tall, pale man with an almost cruel smile. This was the companion of Detective Knight at the festival who had become melancholy with her song. With a gasp she tried to sit up, and stopped when a sharp pain shooting through her head sent a wave of nausea through her. The man pushed her back down gently, and sat next to her on the bench so he could look down into her face. He was barely touching her, but he felt cold. She shivered at the barely perceivable physical contact.

"So, Arielle, we meet again," he purred, and it made her feel distinctly uneasy.

This man, whoever he was, was dangerous, and in a way that would probably eclipse any rage that her stepfather Stan had ever shown. She swallowed convulsively as her heart rate accelerated.

The touch on her face was exquisitely gentle as the man inspected her injuries, yet she cringed even from that light contact. "Janette tells me that you were beaten tonight. It's not the first time it has happened." He made it a statement, not a question. Who were these people that seemed to read her thoughts? She remained mute, her mouth dry and every muscle tense. What did he want from her? His hand moved from her face down to her throat in something that was almost a caress, and she pulled away. His grip tightened to the point of painfulness, and she gave a strangled gasp, causing his hold to gentle again.

She felt trapped, the man's pale eyes and unfathomable little smile pinning her in place. She felt the old panic build up, the terror that welled up inside her when she knew she was going to be punished for some unspecified offense. Licking her dry lips, she begged, "Please, don't..." The man's eyes narrowed as she spoke, and he gripped her throat firmly again, but this time without pain. He did not clarify his intentions, but his smile became less mocking, almost tender.

"You will sleep now, little Arielle, and feel no pain. When you wake, you will not remember this."

She struggled against the hypnotic suggestion, floundering helplessly in the swirling pool of blue, but her meager strength gave out as the terror subsided, and she surrendered as the tide pulled her under. He eyed the ancient silver chain she wore around her neck and smiled. He lifted the ancient links from her neck to examine them. She wore the necklace he had given Fleur seven hundred years ago. He now knew why she seemed so familiar; this was Fleur's descendant. This was going to be perfect. He had planned for this a long, long time.

He rose to his feet as Janette approached him, her eyes wary. LaCroix looked down at her. "I leave her in your care, Janette. Please do not entertain some foolish notion of warning Nicholas. If he interferes with me, I'll know who to come looking for."

Janette swallowed, the casual words generating an icy chill in her. She nodded, knowing it was useless to argue or to defy him.

"Ah, wise choice. Until next time, my dear."

Janette watched in dread as LaCroix moved out through the club. Whatever LaCroix had planned for this child, she hoped Nick would stay out of it.

Chapter Three

Nick walked into the squad room in a cloud of frustration. Schanke spotted his partner and waved. "Well if it isn't my long lost partner!"

"All right, Schanke, you made your point. It took longer than I anticipated."

"What in the blazes were you doing?"

Nick hesitated, reluctant to divulge the truth. Finally he stated flatly, "A girl I know got herself beaten up pretty badly. Her stepfather apparently beats her on a regular basis. She refuses to leave him or press charges."

"Oh hey, man, that's rough." Schanke's face sobered with concern. Both of them knew how many people were victimized by their families or friends and would not or could not stop it.

They worked silently for a while on the multitude of papers and forms that were part of a police shift, and then Nick stretched and stood up abruptly. Schanke could feel the cloud of gloom that surrounded his partner.

"I've got to go, Schanke. I'll stop by Natalie's and drop off those reports for her." With that he turned away, and left Schanke with overwhelming urge to run home to Myra and Jenny and hold them very close.

Natalie was absorbed with a particularly messy-looking gunshot victim. She was examining a bullet wound and missed Nick's entrance into the lab. When her favorite vampire suddenly appeared beside her, she jumped.

"Nick, don't sneak up on me like that! How are you?"

She beamed at him; as always, his handsome boyish face made her heart do a little two-step.

Nick looked very solemn, and Nat's smile faded. "What's wrong, Nick?"

Nick sighed, rubbing the back of his neck thoughtfully. "How much do you know about child abuse, Nat?"

"Well, we did get several courses in medical school, and of course we unfortunately see the end results of it here now and again. Was it anything in particular you had a question about?"

"I know a girl," he grimaced, amending, "a young woman. She's beaten up by her stepfather on a regular basis. She won't leave him and she won't press charges. What can I do to make her see what he's doing to her?"

Natalie looked thoughtful. "It's hard to say, Nick. Children from abusive homes have all kinds of mental blocks that keep them locked into the situation. They have a set of mental 'lies' that guide their thinking and behavior. They try to justify why a parent, who is supposed to love and protect them, would do anything so horrible to them. They tend to minimize whatever injury they receive, or they

feel responsible for being abused, that they did something that caused the abuse. Perhaps she's protecting someone else in the family. It's difficult to determine what all the individual factors could be."

Nick sighed again. "She's so talented, Nat. She has a gorgeous voice. I heard her sing at the Renaissance Festival a few months ago."

"How do you know she was abused?"

"I ran into her at Mercy Hospital ER tonight. Her fifth visit, and she just turned eighteen a few weeks ago. She has a particular talent for 'falling down the stairs.' So far she always escaped whenever they wanted to contact Child Services, and now that she's an adult, it's out of their hands."

"And you recognized her from the street festival?"

"She didn't know me at first, and when I walked over to her to see if she was all right, she threw her arm up, as if trying to keep me from hitting her." Nick sounded disturbed as he related that.

"You're not the big bad wolf, Nick. I'm sure it was just instinctive."

"Recognizing the beast?"

"Boy, are you hard on yourself tonight! Are we tripping down memory lane again? I meant that she was just trying to protect herself. It had nothing to do with you personally."

"Oh hell, Nat, I know that. I'm just feeling sorry for myself, I guess. I just don't want to add to her problems."

"She must have really gotten to you, Nick. Is she someone from your past?"

Natalie had a disturbing way of recognizing when Nick's emotions were tied to past events, and this was no exception.

Nick's eyes focused in the distance. "I see my sister in her, Nat. I don't know how or why, but she reminds me so much of Fleur that it scares me. As for her talent, well let's just say that I ran across another talented music student several lifetimes ago, and she fell victim to us, and I couldn't stop it. I don't want Arielle to die before her time."

"It's encouraging that she's involved in music, Nick. Lots of abused children try to escape through intellectual pursuits. They try to gain what they don't have in real life: friendship, love, safety, or respect. It makes their lives worth living."

"She's eighteen now, Nat. I can't legally intervene unless she permits it. The vampire could do something, I suppose, but that wouldn't be playing by the rules. Still, I'm awfully tempted."

Nick sighed, the weight of the world on his shoulders again. *He really did get wrapped up in his sense of responsibility to humanity*, she thought, and squeezed his shoulder affectionately.

"For what it's worth, Nick, she couldn't have a better champion. If anyone could make a difference in her life, it would be you. Nothing like 800 years of experience!"

Nick smiled a bit at that. "Thanks for the pep talk, Dr. Lambert. How much do I owe you?"

Natalie waved this aside, saying breezily, "Professional courtesy, Detective." She then hesitated. "If you need to talk, Nick, I'm here. I think that this girl is not the only abused child I should worry about."

Nick turned away, his throat tightening. Sometimes the good doctor hit a little too close to home. She knew bits and pieces of his life with LaCroix, but there was much he had not told her that she had probably guessed. He cleared his throat as he turned back, his expression calm.

He spoke briefly. "You can't choose your parents, or your childhood, or be responsible for how they treat you. I know how it is when you are dependent on someone for love, food, shelter and protection, and finding out that the relationship can be conditional. You pay a price for love, and sometimes it's too high."

Nat watched him with compassion. "You love LaCroix, don't you, Nick? Despite everything he did to you, you still care for him."

Nick's mouth quirked a half-sad, half-bitter smile. "He's my 'father', and there were good things in our relationship, but also many terrible things. He'll always be with me in one way or the other."

Nat seemed fascinated, "And LaCroix, what does he feel for you?"

"I suppose he cares."

"But not the way you want him to. You want something that doesn't depend on obedience or living up to someone's expectations. Something without fear."

Nick looked lost for a few moments, and unbearably sad. "You know what they say, Nat, if wishes were horses..."

"Or vampire bats," she murmured, trying to gently tease him out of the depression that seemed to engulf him.

Nick chuckled despite himself and wrapped Natalie in a warm hug.

"Thanks, Nat, maybe someday I'll be able to tell you the rest of it."

"Anytime, Nick, you know that."

Their tender moment was interrupted by the twin faces of Grace and Schanke peering through the door. Grace let out a wolf whistle, while Schanke wiggled his eyebrows, saying, "Perhaps you two need a few more moments?"

"Or a cold shower?" Grace chimed in.

Nick and Natalie separated, flustered. "Nothing's going on, it was just some hug therapy!" Nat blustered, while Nick smiled with angelic innocence.

"Hug therapy?" said Grace doubtfully. "Is that something new in forensics that I missed?"

Schanke shook his head mournfully. "I get brown-bagged carrot sticks from Myra with death threats if I cheat on my diet, and Knight gets passionate clinches with gorgeous female coroners. I just don't get it. Where did I go wrong?"

Nick smiled cockily at the pair in the doorway as he moved past them. "If you've got it, you've got it. Right, Natalie?" He was now back in his element. He

laughed at the dismayed blush that spread across Natalie's cheeks as she stammered some incoherent reply. "You, you..." she stuttered helplessly.

"Bye, Nat, Grace," he smiled. "Bye, Schanke."

With that Nick walked out, leaving both Grace and Schanke to observe Natalie with knowing looks. She turned back to her examining table to try to let the heat fade from her cheeks.

Schanke grinned as he came in through the door. "So what secrets have you been keeping from your good friends, Natalie?"

She turned to glare at the detective. "There is nothing going on between Nick Knight and myself."

Schanke nodded doubtfully. "Uh huh, anything you say, Nat."

She threw up her hands in frustration at certain dense, pigheaded members of the Toronto police department, and stalked back to the body lying on the examining table.

"I think you hit a nerve, Schanke," Grace observed with barely restrained laughter. "Just the thing to get her going in the right direction."

Natalie eyed the two beaming conspirators with a sigh. The next thing she knew, they'd be picking out china patterns for her. The thought cheered her. *Someday, Nick Knight, you and I will be eating off of two plates, in the sunlight.* She smiled radiantly at the two, completely baffling them.

Chapter Four

Arielle was returning from the library several weeks later, one of her few safe havens. She was by nature an introverted person, and although she participated in the local vocal music society, the occasional mark on her face in these last two years either went unnoticed or unremarked. She tended to disappear in the woodwork whenever she could. It wouldn't be too much longer before she finished school. Perhaps she would go on to university, and leave the house. Perhaps she would, if only her mother would agree to go with her...

Arielle was disturbed to find that thoughts of the Raven were still plaguing her. She had snuck out of the club the morning after her night of sanctuary. She had felt guilty for leaving without personally thanking Janette. She still could not remember anything from the time she had laid down to when she had awoken shortly before dawn. Yet something still nagged insistently at her memory. Hadn't there been something else? The only thing she could recall with perfect clarity was the beating and her visit to the emergency department.

The bus dropped her off three blocks from home, and she walked quickly, willing the memories away. She thought instead of her mother. Eleanor was a kind soul, but weak and unfortunately devoted to her husband. She lived in a perpetual state of denial where Stan was concerned. The fact that he would occasionally vent his rage upon her as well as on his stepdaughter was just her cross to bear.

As she entered the house, she heard her parents arguing in the living room, her stepfather angry and blustering, her mother anxious and servile. Then came the unmistakable sound of a fist landing against flesh and her mother's pained cry. It was always the same. She paused in the hallway, knowing that if she interfered she would get more of the same treatment that had landed her in the emergency room the last time. Perhaps she would just leave again, but the old protective instincts flared up. She rounded the corner, her entrance momentarily halting the next blow Stan intended to give his wife.

"Where have you been, Arielle?" Stan demanded angrily. She stood still, and debated what answer might deflect his wrath. He stepped up to her, grabbed her arm, and shook her. "I said, where have you been?"

"Out," she muttered.

Stan grew redder in the face. "It's those damned singers you hang out with. You went to some party, didn't you?"

"I went to the library," she said truthfully.

He looked apoplectic. His hand went back and struck her across the cheek, nearly knocking her off her feet. She tasted fresh blood in her mouth as the inner tissue split against her teeth.

"Don't you dare lie like that to me! You were disobeying me again. You know what happens when you don't do what I tell you!"

He ignored the pleading arm his wife lay on him, knocking her back and to the floor. Grabbing Arielle, he struck her again, this time banging her head against the wall. She saw stars, and slid down to the floor to wait for the next blow with fatalistic determination. *I'll just count blows again, keep counting how many it takes until he knocks me out. I'm up to nineteen now. I can take it.*

Stan, however, decided to turn back to his wife who crouched on the floor, and after a rough shake and a demand for his dinner, he headed for his study, no doubt to smoke a cigarette and drink his Jack Daniels. Arielle stood up slowly and painfully, noting that her mother was on her feet, rearranging her mussed hair absently, the mark on her face livid against the pale skin. It would bruise by the next day, and her mother would cover it up with makeup and pretend it never happened.

She looked at her mother, her eyes pleaded with her to really see what was going on, a desperate attempt she almost never made, because she knew what the answer would be. Eleanor wrapped her apron more securely around herself like a security blanket as she said chattily, "Well, I guess I better get dinner going. You know how your father hates it when it's late." Her bright green eyes refused to acknowledge what had been done to her daughter and herself.

For a moment, Arielle felt the old sense of betrayal. *If you loved me, mother, you wouldn't let him hit me. You wouldn't let him hit you. We'd get away from him.* She watched her mother head for the kitchen, sadness burying the bitterness, knowing that nothing would ever change. She washed her face as best she could. The bruises were stark, but not disfiguring. She changed into comfortable

old jeans and a red fuzzy sweater. Tying her tennis shoes awkwardly with one and a half hands, she then got up to grab her winter parka. She crept down the stairs and left the house through the back door. Perhaps she would be beaten for this rebellion as well, but she had to get away for a while.

Arielle walked through her favorite park, the darkness comforting and concealing. She stopped at the bench near the fountain, the one her real father had taken her to every weekend before he had died when she was nine. This was her thinking spot, somewhere where she felt her father's spirit was, not the impersonal headstone in the local cemetery.

She sat on the bench and stared at the stars, searching out constellations the way her father had taught her. She felt the quiet night wrap comfortingly around her, and she savored its peace. Then a cool hand was laid upon her shoulder.

She stiffened, her heart hammered in terrified rhythm. The tall figure standing behind the bench moved around to sit next to her. She couldn't move, trapped by more than his light physical touch. She turned her head to the patrician-featured man with the silvery hair who sat next to her. The man from the fair, she recognized, and felt unadulterated terror wash over her, almost drowning her. It made no sense, why he frightened her so, for he had done nothing but listen to her singing. His brilliant blue eyes seemed to burn into hers, then they relaxed again.

"Are you listening for the music of the night, little one?"

His deep voice was hypnotic and soothing, and Arielle felt some of her terror subside. She once again felt the cold inside her flowing back to freeze the fiery terror that had held her.

"There's no music now," she said softly, staring straight ahead.

"Are you certain?" he asked in an almost amused voice. "I could swear I hear it."

She could not share his fanciful thought. She looked away.

"What happened, Arielle?" he asked softly, tilting her chin up so she could meet his gaze.

His hand is so cold, she thought irrationally, as she began to fall into his eyes. Her new bruises were starting to show, her lower lip slightly swollen. "He was angry," she whispered, not knowing why she even bothered to answer. "He hit my mother and I tried to stop it again." She shivered a bit, wanting and needing to feel more than this terrible emptiness inside. Even the terror had been a relief from the nothingness that threatened to consume her.

"And what do you feel about that?" he queried, never letting her break his gaze.

"I..." she hesitated, "I don't know. Sometimes I can't feel anything."

LaCroix broke eye contact with her and she almost wilted with relief. It was just too intense when he looked into her eyes. He stared at the night sky, and she looked up where his gaze was fixed.

"Do you like to watch the stars, Arielle?"

The constellations blurred a bit as she answered, "My father taught me. It's sort of family tradition." She missed the quizzical half smile LaCroix gave her.

He paused to look at her intently. "Aren't you afraid to be out alone at night? Most people don't like the dark."

She tried to explain. "It's quiet here. The dark can hide you. Keep you safe."

"The dark isn't always safe. There are many things out here that are dangerous. Many forbidden and wondrous things," he murmured.

She wondered what he meant by that, her confusion evident in her face.

"Danger can be exciting, as well as hazardous. What if it was worth the risk you took to reach it?"

She shook her head again, unwilling to explore that tantalizing idea further. She had seen enough of man's uglier side to know she wanted no part of it, And yet, and yet...

Arielle dared to look at the man now; he seemed so calm and non-threatening sitting next to her. Almost comforting, she thought. She stared back at the heavens. Her thoughts moved in another direction.

"Do you believe there's a God, Mr...? I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"LaCroix, " said the man, "And no, I can't say that I do."

"I'm Catholic," Arielle confessed. "At least I used to be. Now, I don't know what I am anymore, or if I can believe anymore."

LaCroix smiled inwardly, this would be even more perfect than he dreamed. He remained silent, and did not demand any conversation. She suddenly wanted to know what this man thought.

"Mr. LaCroix, what do <u>you</u> believe?"

The pale haired man smiled, "That's a leading question. My way of beliefs is something a little bit off the mainstream." He smiled benignly at the young woman. "I imagine that I would probably shock you to tell you what my religion involves..."

She looked dismayed. "You're not one of those devil worshipers, are you?"

LaCroix's smile chilled her to the bone. "There is no devil, Arielle."

Arielle sat frozen, unwilling to even breathe. He'd seemed so kind up until now. She swallowed and looked away, growing uneasy again. She reminded herself that she knew nothing about this man. She rose to her feet, ready to fabricate an excuse to get away from him. She found herself pulled back down to the bench in a lightening fast movement. Almost the same way Detective Knight had hauled her back into his car. Now the man seemed to radiate menace.

She choked off a cry of fear, as his hand wrapped around the back of her neck. Panicked, she tried to pull from his grasp, but his hold tightened just short of pain.

"Sit and stay a while, Arielle. I would like to talk a bit more," he breathed into her ear. He enjoyed the way her pulse accelerated with the words. He could see and feel her terror and he soaked up the sensation.

Arielle swallowed hard as she tried to think of a way to get away from the man. Who knows what he had in mind, but it was dark and the park was deserted. She should have heeded her gut instincts. LaCroix shifted her easily, moving Arielle to sit in front of him, tucked back intimately between his long legs. She struggled to pull away from him; she felt horribly vulnerable. He wrapped his arms around her and trapped her completely.

She felt him chuckle in her ear. "Now we talk, Arielle. I want to know what he has done to you and your mother. All of it, from the very beginning."

She looked up at his face; he was so tall that he towered over her even when sitting. It was a mistake, for his eyes tilted her world upside down.

In a soft voice, she related the chronicle of her short life. She told him how her mother had married Stan. She was ten at the time. The alcoholism surfaced initially with fights and drunken binges, then gradually verbal abuse of both her mother and herself. The beatings had started six months after the marriage, and Arielle related each event with near-perfect recall, her voice emotionless. The lies, the tearful promises to her mother that he would change, the blind devotion of her mother to a monster, her mother's disregard and denial of both her own and Arielle's abuse, the betrayal Arielle felt, and the grief for her natural father who had died so long ago. Each contradictory feeling, each intellectual rationalization and each emotional booby-trap she had blundered into was laid out in precise detail. LaCroix extracted everything she had known, saw or felt during the last eight years of her life, and absorbed every detail.

Finally, Arielle finished, but LaCroix tipped her head back so she once again looked into his eyes. "Did he touch you, Arielle? Did he sexually abuse you?"

Confused, she stared at him. "No, he never—he didn't do anything like that." She knew enough that some people had terrible things like that done to them, but <u>that</u> thankfully had not been part of Stan's abuse of her.

"Why does he treat you like this, Arielle? What have you done to earn his displeasure?"

Arielle looked stricken, "I never, I...didn't do anything wrong tonight. I was trying to help my mother..."

"You must have done something, Arielle. Why else would a father punish his child?"

"He's NOT my father," she choked, tears not far away. "I didn't do anything..."

LaCroix stopped the words with the tip of his finger touching her lips. He smiled into her wary eyes. "Then he treated you unjustly, Arielle. There is a means of obtaining revenge if you wish it."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"The dark can bring pleasure, as well as pain. Justice for wrongs committed. Retribution from those who have hurt you."

"I don't want to hurt anybody," she said. "I don't want to do what he did to me."

LaCroix stopped that flow of thought easily, moving to the other side of the coin that was Arielle's soul.

"You've never been in love, Arielle? No one's ever been that close to you?"

"No," and her voice was now soft and far away. It did no good to wish for things that were impossible to get.

LaCroix's eyes glittered as his fangs grew. Her head was facing forward again and she could not see him. He broke the mental hold, and Arielle became aware of her surroundings. She stiffened as she tried to pull way from the man who held her against the cold leather coat covering his chest. He seemed to radiate no body warmth at all. He pulled her back against him, one hand stroking her throat almost absently, his cool fingers stirring something in Arielle that was hot and totally unrecognizable. LaCroix smiled again. Oh yes, the instincts were all there.

He then let her pull away, but settled her beside him once more. His arm went around her shoulders as he ignored the way she stiffened in distaste.

His silky whisper rubbed against her nerves pleasantly. "What if I offer you the choice of getting away from your stepfather? Would you come with me?"

Arielle felt a strange pang of bitter disappointment. The pale-haired stranger was no better than the other men who had admired her beauty in the past, their appreciation crude and frightening. She knew enough about what men could do to women. Some of her acquaintances had worse stories than she to tell.

She dared to reply, "Is this the time when you offer me some candy?"

She saw the anger that darkened his eyes, and instantly regretted the answer. His hand tightened cruelly in her hair as he yanked her face close to his.

"Be very careful about what you say or think around me, Arielle. I'm not a forgiving...man."

She swallowed again, as the beast became a lazy panther again, seductive and charming. She cleared her dry throat as she tried to think of what to say.

"My father said that if it came down to it, you should always choose the devil you know, rather than the one you don't."

LaCroix smiled oddly. "Is that what I am to you, Arielle?"

She shivered. "I don't know," she replied. Tears burned in her eyes and blurred his face.

"What do you think I am, Arielle?"

She stared at him levelly. "I don't know," she repeated. "You're... different somehow."

LaCroix felt a strange tingle of anticipation. "In what way am I different, Arielle?"

"You and your friend, the detective, there's something not quite normal. The way you move, and your eyes..." she trailed off, unwilling to delve into her suspicions.

LaCroix was enjoying this immensely. "Do you think I'm some sort of alien, one of the pod people?"

"No, you're not alien, but you're not quite—"

LaCroix watched her with satisfaction, she was obviously physically attractive, intelligent and artistically gifted, qualities that he appreciated very much. And she was innocent, which intoxicated him, but she also seemed to have an extra sense about her, one that he found to be the most compelling quality of all. She recognized him on some fundamental level.

"What do you think I am, Arielle, a ghost? Some strange demon?"

Arielle might doubt that God existed, but she knew for a fact that evil did. And LaCroix, for all his animal attractiveness and seductive charm, was <u>not</u> a guardian angel. She felt the darkness inside of him. She looked at him again, and wondered if he was going to kill her.

"What am I, Arielle?" he repeated. His blue eyes held hers ruthlessly. He enjoyed the fear that began to rise in her.

She ignored the question, tried to loosen his grip on her, then gasped with pain as he tightened his hold, a way of warning her to docility.

"Tell me, Arielle, what am I?"

She jerked away from him, and surprised him into loosening his grasp. She stood three feet away from the seated figure. He watched her with a lazy smile, his lips red against that pale face.

"You can't run, Arielle, I'd catch you before you took two steps."

She knew that, and the thought was frightening enough in itself that he seemed superhumanly powerful, but she feared most for what he wanted to do to her. This man wanted everything, including the soul she denied that she had.

She had to know. "Are you going to kill me?"

LaCroix looked amused again. "Oh no, Arielle, I have much more planned for you than death."

She backed up a step in a feeble attempt to escape the pale-haired man tormenting her. Her vision blurred again as she fought tears of fear and despair. He was doing this on purpose to frighten her, and he enjoyed it. It made him much worse than Stan.

She stood frozen as he got up and approached her, cupping her face as she stood still, trying not to let the bile rising in her throat escape.

His eyes were coldly amused as they stared down into her hers, then lit with a flame that caught hers, and she felt a yearning for him, a rush of heat and desire that shocked her. The fear melted away. His lips met hers, the kiss almost gentle, and for a moment she felt tenderness in him and relaxed. His kiss grew in intensity, and she responded helplessly, unable to control her physical response to

an immortal seduction. Then he moved away, the odd little half-smile he sometimes wore inches from her face.

"Think about which devil you prefer, Arielle," and then he seemed to disappear in front of her blurred eyes. She stared around the deserted park. Perhaps she had dreamt it all. Haunted, she walked back home, despised herself for responding to the strange man, and tried to block the pleasure she had felt with him.

He had not offered to help her. He had not offered a safe haven, or love, or caring. He offered nothing of himself for her benefit. So why was she attracted to him? The question remained unanswered. She walked along the street, lost in thought, and didn't notice the green car pause inquiringly as the driver stopped to view the small female figure and recognized her. "Hey, Arielle!"

Arielle jumped, her heart tripping over itself. First LaCroix, now some degenerate in a car. She backed away cautiously as the driver rolled down his window to grin engagingly at her. It was Nick Knight. Her shoulders sagged with relief as she recognized him.

"What are you doing out so late, Arielle? It's dangerous here after dark."

Yes, she was now well aware of that. She hesitated, tried not to be rude. He had after all been nothing but kind to her.

"I was just out walking and thinking."

His eyes narrowed at the new bruises, and his voice was hard. "He hit you again, didn't he?"

"It was my fault. I tried to break up a fight between him and my mom."

"That's still no excuse to hit you!"

She shrugged, there was no point in explaining further.

"Would like to join me for a cup of coffee?"

Said the spider to the fly, Arielle thought; the unexpected invitation rang unpleasantly of another offer made just a little while ago. She shook her head. "Uh, no, thanks. I better be going. It's late, and I..."

Nick's eyes narrowed further. *Smooth move, Knight, why don't you just go and terrorize the local kindergarten while you're at it?*

"Just coffee, Arielle, and maybe a sympathetic ear. I only do my white knight routine on alternate Thursdays," he said with a teasing grin to bely his previous fierce expression. His eyes locked to her, their heart beats syncopating.

I won't hurt you, Arielle. You can confide in me. We're friends.

She smiled and got in the passenger side. He hated using mind tricks, but something was wrong, more than just her stepfather's latest beating. He felt the lingering presence around the park, and worse yet, he recognized it.

"We'll head over to a diner I know that serves espresso and cappuccino."

"I'd rather have tea, if that's all right with you?"

"Anything my lady desires." He drove off with a theatrical flourish. Nick drove to the all-night diner and led her to booth with comfortably worn and cracked vinyl seats.

He ordered tea for her, but declined to order anything for himself. She stared at him with unblinking eyes as Nick sat down across from her. Nick got the uncomfortable feeling that she somehow knew about him, but that was impossible.

"What is it, Arielle?"

She looked even more solemn. "I saw him again," she said. "I went for a walk in the park tonight. My real dad used to take me to the bench near the fountain. It's where I go to be close to him and to think. Your friend found me there."

Nick's vampire heart began pounding with dread. *What had LaCroix done to her?* He voiced the question on his mind.

"He has this way of making you do things you normally wouldn't..." She hesitated a bit, trying to explain the strange compulsion that had unlocked all those terrible memories. "He made me tell him all about Stan. He wanted to know everything. He got really scary, so I tried to get away from him. He moved so fast...then he offered to let me go with him."

Nick's throat tightened, all too aware of what LaCroix considered payment in return for such favors. "What did he do, Arielle?"

She looked haunted. "You know that old saying about how it's better to stick with the devil you know rather than the one you don't? He said that I could choose the devil I prefer. He kissed m-me," her voice choked off in shame. Nick felt enraged and protective. Damn LaCroix and his games!

"Arielle, you didn't do anything wrong."

She gazed back at him bleakly. "I liked it, even though I know that he didn't really care a thing about me. What does that make me?"

Nick ached for her. LaCroix could seduce any living creature, himself included.

"He's a very dangerous man, Arielle. You don't want to get involved with him in any way."

"Why is he your friend, Detective Knight?"

"It's Nick. It's hard to explain. I've known him for a long time. He's more like a father or an older brother. He and I go way back." Way, way back, he thought to himself, but Arielle wouldn't understand just how long his life had been meshed with LaCroix's. "There's another old saying, that you can choose your friends, but not your family."

"Does he care about you?"

"In his own way. He was responsible for bringing me into a select little group that has some radically different ideas about life. He and Janette still belong to it."

"That religion he talked about," Arielle said.

"Something like that. It supported a bunch of things that I can't believe in anymore, so I left. He's angry about that, and keeps trying to get me back."

"Then what does he want with me? Why is he following me?" she asked in anguish, obviously not understanding the ways that LaCroix enjoyed tormenting his errant child Nicholas.

"I wish I knew what his motives were, but don't trust him, Arielle. He'll chew you up and spit you out and wouldn't care a bit about what he had done."

Her voice was shaky. "You make him sound like a monster."

"He can be, " Nick answered. "I've seen that side of him. He's the type of person who will take anything he wants or needs without considering what the other party involved thinks about it. He has some very... exotic...tastes in his relationships."

"He's a pervert?"

Oh boy, talk yourself out of this one, Knight. "He's just not exactly in tune with the rest of the world. He makes his own rules."

"He's really..." her voice trailed off as she tried to describe that predatory charisma that emanated from him. The look in her eyes gave her away.

"He's not someone who you want to get tangled up with. Trust me, I know."

"I can't help it!" she cried. "I'm not chasing him, he's following me! I look at him, and I feel..." her voice trailed off in frustration as she tried to quantify the attraction she felt for the strange pale-haired man. Nick understood, but remained silent. He was certain that she had no experience in mortal relationships, so how could she ever hope to quantify the attraction to an immortal being? She wouldn't stand a chance to resist LaCroix if the older vampire were determined to go after her. He knew with fatalistic certainty that he could never stop LaCroix. Nick hoped against hope that this interest in Arielle was a temporary amusement for LaCroix and nothing more sinister.

"Your stepfather, you said he hit you again."

Successfully diverted from the topic of LaCroix, Arielle gazed solemnly at Nick. She reminded herself that even if the police officer cared, there was no way he could understand exactly what went on at her house or know what she felt inside.

Nick looked like he was far away, then gazed back at her. "I know what you're going through, Arielle. Only my 'father' had much more unpleasant ways to punish me. It wasn't enough that I did what he said. I never knew whether he was going to be kind or cruel. It makes life very scary when you don't know what's going to happen to you from one minute to the next."

As his eyes met Arielle's she knew then that he understood <u>exactly</u> what she felt. He was such a strong, self-sufficient man. It was hard to believe that he had been in the position she was now. Something in his face gave her the clue she needed. Her stomach lurched with sudden insight. "Mr. LaCroix," she guessed.

Nick nodded reluctantly, "He was responsible for raising me." Nick paused as he tried to explain his relationship with LaCroix in a way that a mortal would understand. "He wants me back with him, so he does things to try to destroy any outside influence on me. I can't go back to him, because I have other things that are more important to me now. But that won't stop him from interfering, even

though he knows it hurts me. He's doing it for my own good, you see." Nick's expression was self-mocking now.

He paused, then tried to express his conflicting feelings. "Sometimes it's worse when they care about you," he said softly. "Because along with the need to escape you feel this incredible guilt about disobeying someone who's looked out for you and does what he thinks is best for you, even though you don't agree. When you can't embrace the lifestyle he follows, you try to leave, knowing that you've hurt him. So he strikes back at you, tries to hurt you in return, and that destroys your relationship."

"Why do you stay around him?"

Nick looked just as trapped as she felt. "I don't, but he's always there, just at the edges of my life."

Arielle looked down at her clasped hands, then back up at Nick. "Do you hate him?"

Nick paused at that, trying to sort out his ambivalent emotions toward the master vampire. "I'm angry at him, and sometimes I just feel sad. He's been a part of my life for so long that I miss him in some ways."

"You still care about him?" she asked in disbelief after hearing that LaCroix had abused him.

"Yes," he answered, his voice almost inaudible. "And he still scares the hell out of me in spite of that fact. You shouldn't have to feel like your father will turn on you for the least little thing, like a difference of opinion. But LaCroix was not what you would call a typical father."

Arielle looked pensive. "My stepfather doesn't care a thing about me, and I hate him. I can handle that. But if you love your father, and he does this to you...it must hurt so much."

"Sort of what you feel for your mother, I guess."

Arielle straightened abruptly as Nick's well-chosen words flew past the emotional armor she wore and struck deep into her heart. "What do you mean?" she asked shakily.

"You were depending on your mother to love and protect you after your real father died. Instead she marries this nasty alcoholic bum who beats up the two of you while she pretends everything is fine. It's not just that she allows herself to be caught up in the mess, but that she lets you get hurt and doesn't do anything about it. Underneath you hate her for that, and feel guilty for hating her. So you stay to protect her because you love her, too."

Arielle bowed her head, her eyes threatening to overflow. "She's never hit me, Nick."

"It doesn't matter. Emotional betrayal hurts just as much as physical pain."

"She won't leave him."

"So you stay with her, but for how long? Until it destroys you, too?"

"I don't know," she whispered, "I don't know what's right any more. I want to leave and go to university. But what if he hurts her worse when I'm gone?"

"Can you stop him now?"

She looked at the table for a long time. "You think I should leave now, don't you?"

"It's not my decision, Arielle, it can only be yours."

He paused briefly, then continued, "And sometimes you pay for your choices, even if you know they're the right ones."

His mind went back into the past.

Nicholas was held helplessly in LaCroix's steel grip. The master vampire dragged him to the wall facing a small window in the opposite wall. The manacles and chains mounted in the wall behind him hinted of a sinister past purpose. Nicholas soon found himself chained with silver, bonds he could not break. His arms were held fast to the wall, and he knew it would be sunrise soon. Terror of what he knew was coming nearly choked him.

"Are you going to kill me, LaCroix? Let the sun burn me away?"

The older vampire chuckled, his expression too benign for the anger underneath.

"Think of this as a purification. Pain is supposed to clarify beliefs, take them down to the basic elements."

Nicholas knew then that his master planned to torture him. He tried desperately to jerk free from his bonds, but knew it was useless. LaCroix stripped off Nicholas' shirt, cutting it free with a small knife he carried for affectation. Vampires didn't need such crude weapons. The sun was beginning to rise; soon the rays would come through the opening. When Nicholas saw the long-handled mirror, he realized that the elder vampire had a more diabolical plan.

"Oh no, Nicholas. The sun's rays won't even come near this wall. The angle is all wrong, you see. But I can deflect them with objects such as these. Amazing things, mirrors. This way I can control where and how much. You will no doubt surrender long before I'm finished with you."

Janette grabbed LaCroix's arm, tried to pull him away from the younger vampire. LaCroix pushed her away casually. "If you interfere again, Janette, I'll chain you next to him and Nicholas will watch while I burn you."

"No, Janette, please leave it be!" Nicholas cried, unable to bear the thought of her being hurt because of his rebellion. He looked at LaCroix frantically, his eyes focused on the older vampire's face.

The sun rose and as the rays began entering the chamber, LaCroix reminded his young companion, "This hurts me far more than it hurts you." Yet his face was expressionless as he held the mirror, the light reflecting the ray inches from Nicholas' face. Nick swallowed convulsively as the light moved closer to him, every nerve tensing for the agony that would follow. Then it came, on his left hand. It was so sudden, and he choked off his cry of pain as the flesh blistered and burned. The next time it struck his shoulder, again his cry was choked off by sheer willpower. The next time it hit his cheek and he couldn't help his scream. The pain

overwhelmed him, blocked out any other sensation. The light moved again and struck his chest. Again. And again. The light fell, sometimes short, sometimes long, and Nicholas lost all control. He screamed until his throat was hoarse, unable to do anything but respond to the pain. Then the light pattern stopped.

"Are you ready to surrender, Nicholas?"

He couldn't even speak, but shook his head no, and the light resumed its work. He could vaguely hear Janette plead to LaCroix in the background, and then the master vampire let the light fall upon his eyes, burning them. Nicholas collapsed, nearly unconscious with the pain. Please, *he thought*, if you do have mercy, end it now. I can't bear it any more.

"Will you yield, Nicholas?" This time the master vampire's voice sounded far away. LaCroix grabbed his chin, forced his burned face up to his. "Do you agree to obey me?"

Nicholas' voice was hoarse but audible, shame now mixed with the physical pain. LaCroix had won. "Yes," he choked, his submission crushing what confidence he had in what he believed was right. If he had been true to his beliefs, strong in faith as Joan of Arc had been, he would have allowed himself to be destroyed and not given in to his master's will. LaCroix reached for him, and Nicholas, caught up in what had occurred, pulled away, and cried out in animal terror.

The older vampire forced Nicholas to look at him, and began a mental assault that far eclipsed the physical torture Nicholas had endured. Weakened by pain, the mental defenses that he normally employed were shattered. His feelings were made clear to the older vampire as LaCroix read his child's every thought. Nicholas was now more physically and mentally vulnerable than he had ever been since leaving his mortal life. He waited, tensed, for the agony that would surely follow.

The light, almost gentle, touch on his mind confused him. Terrified, he tried to pull away, but LaCroix let his will sink over Nicholas like a warm blanket.

"It's all right, Nicholas. There's no more pain. Now you must sleep." The voice inside his mind pushed Nicholas over the edge into oblivion. LaCroix deftly freed the unconscious younger vampire and carried him to the living area. He laid Nicholas on the table, inspected his wounds. LaCroix's lips compressed, but his eyes were unreadable. Then he turned to Janette. "Bring him blood." She scurried off to do his bidding.

LaCroix gazed at Nicholas' ruined face and his face seemed carved in stone. No expression at all revealed his inner thoughts. Why did the boy insist on trying to disobey him? Janette returned with a husky young man, a house servant, who was enslaved to her will. She deftly slit the man's throat and held him over Nicholas, letting the blood fall into his mouth. His lips moved as he reflexively swallowed, then reared up to sink his fangs in the hapless mortal's throat as Janette held the human still.

Nicholas drank, and as he did, his injuries began to heal. The lifeless corpse was tossed aside to be disposed of later. Nicholas slept deeply and dreamlessly for the rest of the day.

Nicholas woke shortly after sunset, the pain from his healing wounds pulling him up into consciousness. He lay on his bed in his own room. His voice locked in a silent scream as LaCroix's face bent over him. He waited with the knowledge that he could not fight the demon who leaned over him. LaCroix sat next to his son, his eyes bore into Nicholas.

"I trust we have come to an understanding, Nicholas?"

"Yes," Nick gritted out. Now that the master vampire had breached his mental defenses, he knew he could have no secrets. LaCroix would always know what his child was thinking or feeling. Nicholas shrank from the older vampire's outstretched hand, wondered if he planned to inflict more pain, and despised himself for the irrational overwhelming fear that now consumed him.

LaCroix looked troubled for a moment. He had never wanted to destroy Nicholas; he had only wanted to discipline him.

"Anything else you want to do, LaCroix, get it over with. I can't fight you now." Nicholas's tone was bitter. In all the time that Nicholas had known the master vampire, he had never been so overwhelmingly cruel.

"I will say to you what I've never said to anyone else, Nicholas. I'm sorry for what I did to you. Regardless of what I felt, I had no right to hurt you like that."

Nicholas looked away. It was just words, meaningless platitudes. LaCroix had wanted to prove a point and damn the consequences. Nicholas' throat ached with unshed tears. After Fleur's death, surely LaCroix would not want to lose Nicholas as well. Perhaps he had thought that in the end, LaCroix would let him go before he destroyed their relationship, but now he knew differently. Nicholas rolled to his other side, away from the vampire who sat so close to him. He could not bear for LaCroix to witness his final humiliation.

Nicholas waited until the fading footsteps indicated that LaCroix had left the room. The physical pain of his injuries merged with his emotional pain, fusing and growing. Then his tears broke loose, as he cried as he never had before, in this lifetime or the previous one. He did not know if he grieved for himself, for Fleur and her lost child or for the severed trust between LaCroix and himself. He did not notice the older vampire glide back silently, or how the older vampire's face twisted with pain at the sight of his child so broken that he grieved like a mortal.

LaCroix touched Nicholas gently on the shoulder, ignored the gulping protest as he gathered him close and rocked him, murmured meaningless comforting words, both verbal and mental. Nicholas wept as he clung to the older vampire, seeking some small piece of paternal affection and comfort. Later, it would be that memory he treasured, for he would never again feel so close to LaCroix. They had never spoken of the incident since, but it remained a barrier between them, for Nicholas would never be able to trust the master vampire again.

Nick returned to the present. Arielle looked at him wordlessly. She had not heard his thoughts or memories, but the pain on his face mirrored what she felt. She reached out to touch his hand, the first time she had initiated any physical contact between them. "I'm sorry, Nick. I guess we all have our nightmares."

Nick took in a deep breath. It had somehow been cathartic for him, to experience what Arielle had gone through, to relive and then bury old memories, but he was not here to help himself. He must help her.

"Will you leave that house?"

"I'll think about it." Her face looked haunted. She stood, adding shyly, "Thanks for listening. I know you have better things to do than spend time with me. Thank you for the tea."

Nick stood up as well. "Anytime you want to talk, Arielle, I'd be glad to listen."

Nick followed Arielle out to his car. They drove to her house in silence. although it was not an uncomfortable one. He stopped at her house, paused to look at her as she opened the car door.

"Remember what I said, Arielle. You can't be there for her forever."

She nodded and headed up the driveway to her house, letting herself in without turning on any lights.

Nick waited for several minutes before putting the car in gear and driving away. He wondered whose demons were worse at this very moment, his or Arielle's.

Chapter Five

It had been two weeks since her fateful meeting with LaCroix in the park, and her cast was gone and her injuries healed. Some days, Arielle could almost convince herself that she had dreamt it all. This went way beyond fascination with some black leather jacketed rebel biker or mysterious European stranger that most women fantasized about. It had almost become an obsession. He seemed to be there every time she fell asleep and dreamed, taunting with promises of dark and dangerous things. Yet in those dreams, he never touched her. He just stood waiting patiently, as if it were a foregone conclusion that she would eventually surrender to him. When she dreamed, he became familiar to her, as if she had known his face for a long, long time. It made no sense at all. She had only met him for the first time while at the fair, still she heard his voice speaking of music, of books, of the stars...

Arielle's mother was at a rare bridge party, which left Stan in front of the television, drinking and cursing his losing team. Arielle knew from long experience that it wouldn't take long until the meanness moved outward, and she'd be caught in the wave of it. He grumbled louder, and she made a sudden decision to head back to the club where Nick had taken her that night after going to the hospital. She could not say why she felt the sudden compulsion. It was almost as if she had heard someone call to her. She pulled out some of her carefully hoarded savings to

pay for cab fare, and snuck out the back door of the house. The taxi deposited her in front of the club, she paid the driver and stood for a moment on the sidewalk. *Why was she here?* she thought muzzily. The answer uncurled lazily in her mind, dimmed her brief confusion. She wanted to thank Janette.

Gathering up her courage, she opened the door, only to be confronted by a huge, burly man with lots of tattoos. She stared up at him wordlessly as the human bouncer rumbled, "Sorry, honey, you gotta be twenty-one to get in. Scram!"

Arielle stared again, her thoughts momentarily scattered. "Excuse me," she said in a polite little voice. "I need to speak with Janette. I'm not here to visit the club."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard it before. Run along home, little girl."

With that, the man made a motion to take her arm and move her to the door. And then they were both startled by the voice behind them. "Samuel, what is going on?"

"Oh, it's you Ms. Janette. This kid says she needed to talk to you, but you know how these kids'll try anything to sneak in here."

The exquisite face smiled at the befuddled bouncer. "It's all right, Samuel. Arielle is a friend. She may come in."

"Whatever you say, boss," said the man as he stepped back and let Arielle pass him. She glanced at Janette and tried to express herself coherently. "I left suddenly the other morning. I didn't get a chance to say good-bye, or to thank you, so I wanted to make sure I did."

Janette looked amused. "And it took you so long before you found the courage?"

Arielle felt small at the words and hung her head. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "It was awfully rude to wait so long."

Janette waved the apology way with one elegantly gloved hand. "It's fine, my dear, I don't mind. I have all the time in the world."

Arielle smiled tentatively at the beautiful, mysterious woman. *What I'd give to have her confidence*, she thought. "I appreciate your help. It got bad at home." A long comfortable silence passed. Arielle felt the other woman's compassion. She understood somehow.

Then Arielle cleared her throat. "Well, I guess I'd better be going." Janette opened her mouth to speak, then stiffened, turning to the door. Both females watched as the tall pale-haired man moved into the room and Arielle pulled back into the shadows, her heart beating faster in fearful recognition.

"I've got to leave, Janette. Thank you for your help, but I can't let him find me."

"It's too late, cherie. He has already seen you," Janette said drily. She didn't doubt that LaCroix had summoned Arielle. His power over her was obvious.

"Good evening, Janette," he said as he lifted her gloved hand to his lips with grace. "I trust it is a convenient time for me to visit?"

"Of course, LaCroix," she said evenly, trying not to let her inner turmoil show. Then the vampire's eyes focused on the figure who stood in the shadows. He smiled, although the expression was not reassuring in the least.

"Well, who do we have hiding here? "

Arielle remained still, somehow hoped to escape his notice, but he reached out and grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him without effort. The vampire stared down at his frightened prey and turned to Janette. "We'll take a seat in the back. Arielle and I have much to discuss."

Arielle tried to dig her heels in, but he literally dragged her with him. She could not even begin to break his hold, although to be fair, he was not hurting her. LaCroix found an empty booth and urged Arielle into the circular bench seat, then sat across from her.

"What do you want?" Arielle asked, with dread.

LaCroix considered the question. "What do I want, Arielle? That might take a while to list." Macabre humor shone in his eyes.

"What do you want from me?" She stared straight at him with an effort.

"Good! Nothing like moving straight to the topic of interest! What has Nicholas told you about me?"

That you hurt him, she thought silently, then answered carefully, "Only that you, he and Janette were part of your strange religion and that he left you. And that you want him back but he won't let you take him back."

LaCroix laughed at that. "He won't let me, that's very amusing. He is where he is now because I <u>let</u> him leave. If I chose, he'd be back with me now. It is my indulgence toward him." He paused, his hand reached out across the small table to lay lightly against her neck, and he smiled when he felt her shiver.

"I suppose that Nicholas has filled your head with all kinds of nonsense about me, hasn't he?"

Arielle licked her dry lips. "He said you were dangerous and warned me not to talk to you."

"Dangerous," LaCroix repeated thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose he has a point. But I am more than that, Arielle. Much more than that."

"He said that you..." she broke off. The glitter in his eyes unsettled her.

"Yes, Arielle?" he questioned.

She remained silent, her thoughts jumbled by the thought of Nicholas being abused by this man. Was he a child molester?

LaCroix read the thought on her expressive face and laughed. "No, Arielle, that is one thing I have yet to be accused of. No challenge in it, you see. But in any case, it hardly applies in your case, does it? You are legally an adult now. Free to make your own decisions."

"What do you want with me?" she asked again with even more apprehension.

"What do I want with you, " he repeated, as if mulling over a choice of ice cream flavors. "Well, I suppose, everything."

At that Arielle shot up from the seat, but found herself caught in an iron grip. She had never seen him move.

"Now, now, Arielle, it's rude to leave someone in the middle of a conversation."

She glanced around, tried to find another exit. He read the thoughts in her face and shook his head mockingly. "No escape routes left, Arielle. Sit, " he insisted. She did as he ordered. He moved to sit down next to her, his arm lying on the back of the bench almost, but not quite, touching her.

"What if I said you had nothing to be afraid of, Arielle?"

"You'd be lying," she whispered, finally understanding how awful it must have been for Nick to grow up with this man in control of his life. She could have no way of knowing that the 'growing up' was eight hundred years of immortality as a vampire.

"An interesting concept, but unnecessary. I am most sincere in that remark. You have nothing to fear from me. With certain conditions, of course."

She waited for the other shoe to drop, and knew she wouldn't like what she heard.

"The first condition is that you come with me of your own free will. The second is that you will always obey my wishes. "

"And if I don't?"

LaCroix smiled innocently, "Then we find out just how much you have to fear, don't we?"

She shivered; it was all a game he played. He didn't care whom he hurt in the process. "What would I gain from that?"

"Why, any number of things, but the most important to you is that you get away from your stepfather."

"And what do you get out of it?"

LaCroix paused, then smiled almost blindingly. "Why, I get you, Arielle. I get every part of you. Heart, mind, body, blood and soul."

She was silent. Her face revealed her revulsion.

LaCroix's smile mocked her. "What are you thinking now, Arielle. Are you wondering what I have planned for you?"

He smiled down at her; he could almost hear her thoughts churning frantically.

"What do you think I have in mind for you, Arielle, a quick trip to my house followed by a messy little seduction? Or maybe something a little more kinky? The possibilities are endless, aren't they? What is it that *you* want to happen, or isn't that something you dare think about? Strange, isn't it, when what a person wants and fears are the same thing," he breathed into her ear, enjoying her shudder, knowing it wasn't entirely fear.

"What I want I can never have," Arielle said flatly. She tried to shut out unfamiliar erotic thoughts that crossed her mind as she looked at the man across from her...

"How do you know, Arielle, unless you ask for it?"

She looked down at her feet, trying to articulate what she secretly wished for, and those hypnotic eyes drew her back to his face.

"Someone to love, and who would love me."

"Much too limited, Arielle. There is so much more out in the world. Things that wait for you in the dark, if you have the courage to seek them."

Arielle watched him in fascinated horror. She remembered Nick's words about LaCroix's exotic tastes and she wondered what thoughts hid behind his blue eyes. She peered into them cautiously, seeking answers he would not give. There was a compelling flame there, drawing her onward, beguiling her with unspoken promises.

He stood up as the dreamy beat of a rock ballad filled the room and pulled Arielle gently to her feet.

"Dance with me, Arielle," he said as he guided her to the floor. She followed blindly. He caught her in a close embrace and Arielle was again made aware of how much taller and stronger he was. He was more casually dressed, in jeans and leather jacket. Black, of course. She wondered if he ever wore any other color. He smelled of a tangy cologne, and something faintly metallic that she could not place.

He was an excellent dancer, and Arielle, who was naturally graceful but had danced only twice in her life, followed him easily. He was in complete control and both of them knew it.

She tried to distract him. "If you're doing this to punish Nick, I won't let you. He doesn't deserve it."

LaCroix laughed again. "Oh my, Nicholas has a champion. I wonder if he ever will tell you the full story. You'll probably not want to jump to his defense so quickly."

I wonder if this what it was like for Nick, when he was little, she thought. LaCroix was in his early forties, she guessed, and Nick was maybe thirty or so. He would have been an adult when Nick was a child, and at the mercy of the older man. It would have been awful to be so helpless against that implacable will.

Arielle looked defiant, despite her fear. "You hurt him, didn't you?"

"Nicholas, unfortunately, never understood what it meant to *honor thy father*. He was a most incorrigible child."

"How could you do that?" Arielle choked. Visions of Stan's furious face as he beat her lingered in her head.

"Do what, Arielle?" he asked almost absently as they swayed to the music.

"Hurt him. How could you hit him when he was so much smaller than you were?"

LaCroix's eyes were amused again. She had been told a slightly edited version of the truth. He had wondered how Nicholas would try to explain their complicated relationship.

"Nicholas had to learn that he must obey his father. I don't tolerate disobedience and I never will."

Arielle appeared stricken. "You don't really love him, or you wouldn't have done that to him."

LaCroix's fury erupted at that statement and he snarled at the young woman, his eyes glowed with unearthly fire. "You dare to presume what I feel for Nicholas?"

Arielle pulled away from him, the old terror choking her. This was the rage and lack of control she experienced at Stan's hands, only now magnified a hundred times by the platinum-haired man holding her. The man was going to kill her in his rage, and she would not be able to stop him.

As she waited fatalistically, her eyes blind with terror, LaCroix was forced to recall an unpleasant memory from the past, his mind reeling him back to the night they had found Fleur, and then that day when his anger had nearly destroyed his child. The memory of Nicholas, broken and sobbing, tweaked his almost nonexistent conscience. This lack of control would never do. He had no wish to destroy Arielle. There were so many other things he had planned for her. And for Nicholas.

LaCroix conveniently pushed the memory of his torture of Nicholas out of his mind as if it never happened. As his face cleared of anger, Arielle wilted. Her heart hammered away and she stood stiffly in his embrace, knowing she couldn't break free until he allowed it. As the fury left him, he focused on the frightened young woman in his arms. She trembled a bit, tried to put as much distance between their bodies as possible. His eyes narrowed as he changed tactics.

The beat became seductive as the female singer crooned about passion after midnight, and he deliberately gathered Arielle even closer, so that she was fully pressed against him. She couldn't pull away, and stiffened further. She had never been held this close to a man, and the pale-haired devil could read the thought in her eyes. He smiled again as they swayed to the music. "What's the matter, Arielle?" he whispered. "Don't tell me you haven't done this before."

She hated him at that moment. The intensity of her emotions heated her blood to a point where LaCroix was close to forgetting good intentions as his fangs grew. *Perhaps just a taste*, he thought as he nuzzled her neck. He ignored the outraged rigidity of her body. When LaCroix let his teeth touch the pulsating artery in her neck, Arielle shuddered.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like the dark, Arielle?" he whispered to her.

She shouldn't feel this way, she thought, then caught the mocking laughter in his face. He amused himself with his casual contempt of her. No wonder Nick had so desperately wanted to get away from him.

Any feeling of attraction to LaCroix promptly dissolved. She wanted to cry, and she didn't want this man to see it. Useless thought; the tears slipped out, her fear mixed with the pain of his ridicule. *I'm nobody*, she thought. *Not to Stan,*

not to my mother, and not to this strange man whom I can't stop thinking about. She turned her face into his jacket, no sound escaped her as she cried. She had learned that lesson long ago.

She waited for a blow, or some disparaging remark from him, but he only led her off the floor to their table, sat down and pulled her into his lap, to gather her close. She curled up to him and cried, not caring if he was evil, that he would eventually destroy her and maybe even Nick. Nothing mattered except the pain inside. LaCroix thought of Nicholas as he bent his head over hers. Nicholas had cried like this and that memory disturbed LaCroix. He cradled the human in his arms, murmured reassurances that echoed those he had given Nick so many years ago. After a time, Arielle finally stopped crying and lay still and unmoving against him, an occasional watery sniff punctuating the silence.

"Are we done now?" he inquired politely, handing her a silk handkerchief in a gallant gesture. She wiped her face and blew her nose. "Why the tears, Arielle? You were holding up so well until now."

She refused to look at him, but he turned her face forcefully to his. There was no use in avoiding the question. He'd get it out of her somehow.

Her voice was hoarse. "Nick said I should stay away from you and I have! But you keep finding me, and saying things, and—and then you..." her voice trailed off in a choked sob. It wouldn't do any good. This man would still do whatever he wanted just for his own gratification. He stared at her, his agile mind sorted the looks on her incredibly expressive face.

"Forgive me, Arielle, I'm not exactly a patient man. I tend to take what I want, when I want it, and that's just my way. I haven't had much practice in recent years in considering other people's feelings." His expression was one of solicitous concern, but she did not believe him. She felt...exposed. He read her thoughts and feelings and turned them against her with ease, not caring in the slightest if she got hurt. If she agreed to go with him, he'd no doubt continue the same pattern. Charming one moment, cruel and dispassionate the next. That sort of emotional roller coaster seemed more deadly than Stan's abuse of her. She was beginning to understand why the 'devil you know' was indeed the wiser choice.

She looked at him through blurred eyes. "I want to go home."

"And if I said no?" came a reply so calm as to freeze her with dread. Before the fear could crest, he lifted her carefully off his lap to her feet. He stood and towered over her. He guided her towards Janette, who had caught only bits and pieces of their exchange.

"Will you please call a taxi for Arielle, Janette? She needs to get home."

"Oui," Janette murmured, and signaled the bartender to place the call. Then she turned to face the younger woman, and noted the tear streaks on her face without comment. She sensed Arielle's turbulent emotions as she recalled her own first night in the brothel when she had been just as naive and innocent as this young one was. And how bitter, frightened and disillusioned she had been at the end of that first night. She did not know the particulars of their little 'discussion',

but it was safe to say that LaCroix had made some impossible demands or ultimatums. *It's no better than rape*, she thought, *for what defense would the young mortal have against the master vampire?* LaCroix caught her thoughts and tipped her an imaginary salute as he ushered a shell-shocked Arielle to the door.

The bouncer stepped back respectfully and LaCroix opened the taxi door when it pulled up to help her inside. His face twisted into a smile. "We'll be seeing each other soon, Arielle," he murmured. The cab pulled away, leaving his figure in the distance. Arielle leaned back against the seat, mentally and emotionally exhausted.

LaCroix reentered the club and noted idly that Janette was angry. He walked behind her, pressing his hands casually but possessively on her shoulders.

"You were saying, Janette?"

Janette breathed in deeply a few times to maintain control. "Why are you doing this, LaCroix?"

"Doing what, Janette?" he asked, his clever hands traced her bare shoulders and raised goose bumps in her chilled flesh.

"You saved me from the brothel, LaCroix. You chose to let me have my revenge on the men who had hurt me, yet you would do the same to this girl?"

"She's a mortal, Janette, and as such she is of no consequence," he said calmly.

Janette continued, "You know she's Nikola's special interest. Why do you insist on tormenting him through her? She doesn't deserve this."

"She? Whom are you pleading for, Janette? This fragile human, or for the mortal girl you once were?"

Janette was silent, unable to answer the question. What would Arielle have to suffer at the hands of a vampire bent on some game of revenge against Nicholas? Would he kill her, or would he bring her across to torture for eternity, not show the least bit of affection or care that he had intermittently shown Janette and Nicholas?

"I would ask you to reconsider, LaCroix," Janette said in a low voice.

LaCroix looked amused. "I believe that you are actually asking for a favor, Janette. Does this girl mean so much to you? Or is it Nicholas that concerns you?"

She ignored the question as the master vampire's lips touched her neck to seek the slow pulse that beat there. The old longing, mixed with a cautious fear, filled her again. This, too, was a little reminder for her benefit, lest she become too complacent. He would not let her forget who was master here.

"What will you do, LaCroix?"

LaCroix straightened, satisfied that she had understood his warning. "Anything I want, Janette. That's the whole point of the exercise, isn't it?"

Chapter Six

Arielle had gone out before supper to fetch a few more items from the supermarket at her mother's request. It had been almost two weeks without any major eruptions. She juggled the sack in one arm as she approached the front door, and stopped in dismay as she heard the sound of Stan's enraged screaming. She pushed her way in the door firmly, dreading the confrontation that would follow. She saw Stan shouting at her mother as she backed away from him on the upstairs landing. His ranting made no sense, but Arielle presumed it had to do with his clothing and ironing, or the lack thereof. There was always something he could find fault with, and usually did. He was drunk again, his meaty face flushed, and Arielle watched in horror as they grappled on the landing and Eleanor tried to escape his fists.

There was a long pause. Things stood still, like time-lapse photography. This would be a memory that would haunt Arielle until the day she died, as she watched her mother lose her balance and tumble down the stairs to her feet. It was so loud, the sound her mother's head made when it hit. The unnatural angle of her neck gave silent testimony that Eleanor's suffering had ended. Arielle was unaware of dropping her bag and moving to the motionless figure lying at the bottom of the steps.

She gently touched the bloodied head and stared into hazel eyes that had fogged over like a mirror exposed to steam. Arielle had never seen a person die before. Stan was sobbing in drunken disbelief, collapsed on the steps above her. His rage had left him completely. Arielle reached for the phone and called 911, and as the operator came on, she found she could not speak.

"Hello? Do you have an emergency? Hello?"

She stared at Stan, and then at her mother, finally she choked out the address, and told the operator that her mother was dead. The phone dropped from her hand, and she was heedless to the squawking voice that asked for more details. The police arrived with the ambulance.

Nick cruised around in his Caddy with Schanke while the other officer regaled him with yet another psychic prediction from Myra's aunt, and heard the address in disbelief. Knight spun the car around so fast that Schanke spilled his coffee and lost his donut on the floor.

"81 Kilo, we'll be responding."

"What in the heck are you doing, Knight?" Schanke blustered, dabbing ineffectually at the coffee on his jacket.

"That's Arielle's address," Nick said tersely as he concentrated on speeding through traffic.

"Holy...you mean the kid that you've been trying to help?"

Nick nodded as they reached their destination and he pulled up to the house. They saw some black and whites as well as the ambulance. A large sobbing intoxicated man was babbling, "It was an accident, she just fell..."

Nick dashed inside, expecting the worst and saw Arielle sitting beside a woman's body, softly stroking her bloody hair. She seemed oblivious to the police who tried to talk to her. He knelt down beside her and touched her on the back. She looked up with blind eyes, then gradually focused on the familiar face.

"Is this your mother, Arielle?" he asked gently.

"She's dead," she said simply, her hand never faltering in its caress of the woman's head.

"Yes, Arielle, I can see that."

She stopped the movement of her hand as the air rushed out of her lungs. "She won't get hurt any more now. He can't hurt her any more."

Nick closed his eyes, then gripped her shoulder, tried to offer comfort, dismayed when she pulled away and cringed from his touch. "We have to get a statement from you. Arielle, please tell us what happened here."

She stood slowly, then faced the tall police officer and unemotionally related the events that had taken place. She then turned back to the lifeless body, ignoring the police officers. In the confusion that followed, as Stan was arrested and forensics experts swept through the house, no one noticed Arielle slip out the back door.

Nick found her in the back yard, on an old garden swing, humming and rocking back and forth. She was lost in her own little world.

"We have to take you downtown for an official statement, Arielle," he said gently, noting her blank eyes and hurting for her. No one deserved this.

She looked at him solemnly, then rose without speaking. She allowed him to take her arm as he guided her to the car, settled her in the front seat and efficiently fastened her seat belt. Schanke climbed in the back seat, for once quiet. The trio said nothing to each other. At the station he parked at the curb and climbed out to help Arielle from the passenger side.

Nick unfastened the safety belt and pulled her up out of the seat. She followed him blindly, neither seeing nor caring.

They brought her to an interrogation room and set up the recorder. One officer from the scene, Captain Cohen and Natalie were present while the fragile young woman related every detail, from the first abuse to the death of her mother. Almost exactly what she had told LaCroix. Arielle had responded politely but blankly to the introductions. They knew her, but she did not know them.

Natalie's eyes burned as she listened to the little girl who had lost her father, then even her mother's protection as her stepfather proceeded to destroy every positive thing in her life. Schanke looked shook up, as did the young uniformed officer at the scene, but Captain Cohen just looked sad. She had seen it too many times before. Arielle finished an hour later, and looked up at Nick, "Can I leave now?"

"Where would you go, Arielle? Do you really want to go back to your house tonight?"

"I don't know," she said in a small voice.

Natalie ventured, "Why don't you let her stay with you, Nick? Just for a few days."

Nick found himself railroaded into it by the time Captain Cohen and Schanke had pronounced the idea an excellent one. Natalie would have volunteered to keep Arielle at her apartment, but she knew that Nick would understand her better, as he had his own demons to lay to rest.

Natalie whispered a bit of encouragement in Nick's ear. He clasped her hand, then kissed the palm lightly and held it close to his chest for a moment. He and Nat were unaware of the speculative looks that Cohen and Schanke gave them after their intimate little exchange. Schanke felt cheerful for the first time that evening. At least one thing was going well in Nick's life.

Nick led a subdued Arielle out of the building as Schanke sidled up to Nat. "I just wanted to let you know, Natalie, all kidding aside, I'm glad you and Knight are together. Lord knows he needs somebody."

Nat gave him an affectionate little punch. "Thanks, Schanke."

"Of course, you're not getting any younger either, so I guess it's a good thing."

Natalie turned and pummeled him, glad for the distraction.

Nick let Arielle into his apartment. She looked so lost and alone. He guided her to the couch, trying to dig out some human beverage from a cabinet for her. An old bottle of scotch came to light. He blew off the dust, opened it and poured her a glass. *Great, Knight, now we'll give the kid some alcohol. You're a wonderful role model here!*

She sipped absently at the glass he offered, then her eyes widened as she choked and sputtered. He massaged her back while she tried to catch her breath.

"Okay, we'll consider that experiment a failure." He leaned back to look at her more closely. "I want you to know, Arielle, that I won't push you. If you want to talk, that's fine; or we can just sit, that's fine, too. I'll just be here for you."

"You don't have to worry about me. " Her polite little voice twisted his innards. "I'll be fine."

"I know you're hurting Arielle. It's all right to let it go, you know. I'm your friend and I care about you."

She collapsed suddenly and the tears fell. She curled up into herself, weeping and rocking, unaware of Nick holding her tightly and rocking with her, offering what comfort he could.

She cried for a time, mourning her mother, her long-dead father, and the loss of what she knew would come when she yielded to the pale devil, for she knew she wouldn't be able to help herself. Eventually the crying stopped. Nick handed her some tissues to wipe her eyes and blow her nose. She gathered her composure and sat up. Nick released her and turned to face her.

"I'll sleep here on the couch, and you can have my room."

"Don't be ridiculous," she sniffed. "I'll sleep on the couch. I wouldn't dream of throwing you out of your bed."

They argued the issue a bit more and Nick discovered that Arielle could be just as stubborn as he was. When Arielle was settled in her makeshift bed, the sun was rising. Nick said something vague about seeing her that evening, and then she slept. Her dreams were tormented by images of what had happened at the house, and interspersed were erotic images of a pale haired man that now even invaded her sleep.

Arielle woke as Nick came down, dressed for work. He put on his shoulder holster as he explained the door code and gave her the list of numbers for fast food places that delivered. "Promise me you won't go out, that you'll order your food and sit tight."

"I promise, Nick," she said solemnly, tears welling up in spite of her best efforts.

"I don't want to leave you alone, Arielle, but I have to go to work. If it gets too much, you call the station and I'll be back here in a flash."

He was incredibly kind, she thought. Much more than she deserved. She forced a smile. "I'll be fine, Nick. I figured out how to work your entertainment center."

He tapped her nose with an admonishing finger. "Remember what I said, Arielle."

"Yes, big brother."

Nick eyed her curiously. "Is that how you think of me?"

She stammered the beginning of an apology, horrified that she might have offended him, but he stalled her protest by lightly laying his hand over her mouth.

"It's fine, Arielle. I like being thought of that way."

He smiled and waved as he headed down the elevator, leaving Arielle with a warm fuzzy feeling. She dialed up the local pizza place for a medium extra deluxe.

Twenty minutes later, the intercom buzzed. She pressed the button as she answered cautiously, "Yes?"

"Hey, lady, I got your pizza here. Hurry up before it gets cold!" The thin nasal voice was totally unfamiliar, and Arielle pressed the release button for the elevator door. She pulled out her purse to get the money to pay for her food. She was absorbed in counting out the bills as the elevator door opened. "Just a second," she said, not looking up. "I'm trying to get the right change."

"It's on the house," came a deadly whispered voice, deep and terrifyingly familiar. She looked up and froze. LaCroix stood there with the pizza box still steaming in his hand. "We meet again, Arielle." She stood frozen, unable to move as LaCroix set the box down on the table and walked to her. She did not want to think of what might have happened to the pizza delivery boy.

He took her purse and money from her and set them on the table, then pulled her to sit on the long black couch. He eased into the chair opposite her, and watched with intense, amused eyes.

"Imagine my surprise when I found that Nicholas was hiding you here, like a kitten he found on the road. He does tend to adopt any stray pet that happens his way."

"Please leave here," Arielle asked in a low tone. "I'm sure he doesn't want you to be here."

"Yes, I imagine he wouldn't. But that's his problem. You see, he doesn't know what he wants."

"Please go away, Mr. LaCroix. I don't want to go with you."

"Of course you do, Arielle. You want to find out exactly what happens after two people dance so close together. I imagine that I'll have quite a few things to teach you over the next few years."

That was blatant. She became aware again of just how magnetically attractive this man was. *They probably fall all over him*, she thought, *until they realize what's inside.* Nicholas's warning about the price of this man's affections stayed firmly in place. He was too unstable. She wondered if he was entirely rational.

Arielle's eyes darkened with grief. Her mother had been dead for less than 24 hours, and she was having dark, disturbing thoughts about tall, platinum haired men who wore black leather. He saw the sadness immediately.

"What is it, Arielle?"

"My stepfather killed my mother last night. They were fighting and she fell down the stairs."

LaCroix's eyes darkened. "Then I apologize humbly for adding to your distress, little one." His voice was still lightly mocking, but surprisingly, there was some tenderness in it. "No tears, Arielle?"

"I don't think I have any left," she said quietly, and rose to walk over to the piano. She stood there, not noticing LaCroix until he sat down on the bench.

"What shall I play for you, Arielle?"

She looked at him in surprise, wondering if he was as musically gifted as he was persuasive. He was incredibly attractive, but that didn't compensate for major character flaws. "Brahms," she requested, and sat gingerly next to the tall man as he tugged her down next to him. He played extraordinarily well, and she was caught up in the music before she knew it. It was melancholy, this music he played. She closed her eyes, letting LaCroix spin a dream around her. There was such sweetness in it, and his expression was soft and tender. The memory in his eyes humbled her. Whoever she was, this ghost from the past that had surfaced after her song at the fair, she was with him again tonight. She wondered how so complex a man could have loved someone so simply and purely.

"Did you love her a lot, Mr. LaCroix?"

He did not even pause is his playing, his eyes focused on something far away from the present. "With all my heart, for all my life."

Her throat burned and her eyes stung at that revelation. How she wished someone would love her like that, the way he had this nameless woman from his past. She knew instinctively he would never love anyone like that again. What he offered her was nothing compared to that.

He seemed to focus again on the present, and his expression became harder. He shook off whatever memory had enveloped him, and the gentleness she had felt in him was masked again. It was as if it had never existed. He looked at her with calculation.

"Think of it, Arielle. You could spend your entire lifetime studying music if you wished. Or history, or art, or any other subject you fancy. Imagine having all the time in the world to learn everything you wanted to. And I'll be with you, Arielle."

"'All this I give you, if you will fall to my feet and worship me'," Arielle quoted in a small voice, recognizing the strings attached to this offer.

LaCroix's eyes were amused at her answer. She was quick.

"What are you thinking, Arielle?" his low voice murmured over the music. She turned to look at him.

"I was thinking about what Nick said about you."

"And what particular bit of wisdom were you referring to?"

"About paying for your choices."

"Ah, yes, everything does have its price. It depends on how badly you want it."

And was it worth what he wanted her to pay?

"You don't care that what you're doing is wrong, and that you'll be hurting people by doing it?"

"What is wrong about taking what you want from life? No one will give it to you," came the calm and perfectly reasonable reply.

Arielle stared at him; he really didn't see it at all. He did not understand that you couldn't just fit the world to your liking, and ruin other lives in the process. Arielle had never before met a totally amoral person, and she was fascinated in spite of herself.

"Why are you like this?" she wanted to know.

"Like what?" he asked back, his fingers never stopping on the keyboard.

"Why do you act like this?"

LaCroix faded away, long into his past.

"Worthless cur! I'll teach you to obey me! You will never try to run away from me when I punish you."

The stick fell against his small back, bloodying it. Then his father's fist descended to his face again and again. So many times it had happened. He heard the echo of his mother's helpless, tormented weeping as she pleaded for her small son. And beneath it all, the pain. The never-ending pain.

He was unaware of how closely Arielle was watching him, desperately seeking some clue as to why the man had become what he was today. What pain he had in him that equaled or eclipsed her own or Nick's.

LaCroix jerked back to the present. Stopping the music and leaning over, he let his lips touch her neck, and smiled again as he felt her racing pulse. She sat like an animal in the headlights of a car, unable to move. She could feel his lust, and was transfixed by it. Her eyes closed as she swayed closer to him.

It was almost appallingly easy, LaCroix mused. Mortals really did not stand a chance against the vampire, and then he heard her voice whispering to him, "I won't go with you, Mr. LaCroix."

He jerked his growing fangs away, irritated and intrigued by her defiance. She now was growing more immune to the mind tricks. What had brought about that change? He stood and looked at her for a long time. "We'll see, Arielle. The game isn't over yet."

He stood up, and Arielle watched him move toward the elevator door.

"Until later, *ma cherie*." And then he seemed to disappear. Arielle stood blinking, disoriented. No one disappeared into thin air. Her dread about possible supernatural events intensified. She was not yet willing to admit to what she thought he was.

When Nick came home before dawn, Arielle was asleep, but Nick knew that LaCroix had been there. With dread, he turned her head from one side to another, examining her neck. No marks, he saw in relief, but it was only a matter of time. He climbed into bed and slipped into an exhausted slumber, wondering if he was capable of protecting her at all.

Chapter Seven

Nick had dropped Arielle off at Natalie's apartment, hoping to keep her safe while he went to confront LaCroix. He was pleased and surprised at how well the two of them seemed to get along, even after such a brief meeting before. He knew Natalie would take care of Arielle.

Letting his vampire senses guide him, Nick took to the air, his mind reaching out for a familiar presence. He would not find him unless the older vampire allowed it. There, a wisp of recognition. Nick landed in the same park that Arielle had been walking in. The older vampire stood looking at the fountain, his tall body relaxed.

"LaCroix," Nick said evenly, trying not to let the antagonism show in his voice or face.

LaCroix turned to look at him, the amused smile indicating that Nick's thoughts were still quite transparent to him. "Good evening, Nicholas."

Nick challenged him. "Why are you tormenting Arielle?"

"Tormenting?" LaCroix said as his eyebrow rose. "I hardly think that."

Nick didn't know the details of the meetings between the two of them, but he recalled the look on Janette's face as she described the two of them dancing, and the way LaCroix had made Arielle cry. LaCroix could be a bastard when he chose, which was most of the time.

LaCroix smiled slightly, enjoying the other vampire's helpless bristling. "Chance meetings, Nicholas. They happen all the time."

Nick was growing angrier, "You are playing games with an innocent child! She never did anything to you. You've never shown an interest like this in mortals before, so why now?"

"Ah, but she's very special, Nicholas. She has experienced much in the way of mortal misery, its violence and pain, yet she still searches for something, drawn to the night. Perhaps I can offer what she is looking for. There was a poem written about our kind, mere fancy, yet nonetheless compelling."

Nick waited as the elder vampire paused in mock ponderment, then quoted softly, "'Is it because, at last, we love the darkness, love all things in it, tired of too much light?' * Do you think she would choose the darkness, Nicholas?"

Nick was barely holding on to his temper. LaCroix was not, of course, speaking of what humans considered seduction. Vampires did not, in the strictest sense, engage in sexual intercourse. Their culmination is, however, something far more devastating and sensual: an exchange of blood, if between two vampires, and a draining of blood, if one partner was human. The human, unfortunately, almost always died as a result of this union. That was why Nick never allowed himself to lose control around Natalie. He might kill her in his blood lust. LaCroix had not taken things that far, for Arielle did not bear the marks. But she would; it was just a matter of time.

"Do you want to kill her, LaCroix? Is this part of the revenge you planned against me because of Fleur?"

"I haven't decided, Nicholas. She's been so entertaining so far that I might decide to keep her for a while."

He was speaking about bringing Arielle across as a vampire and corrupting her. Nick felt sick inside. He struck out at the only vulnerable spot he knew in the older vampire.

"So you'll terrorize her, cut her off from humanity. Threaten her and punish her into accepting our lifestyle. Take her without any regard to her feelings and eventually destroy her because after she bonds to you, you'll abandon her. She won't be able to help herself, and then she'll be left alone. Alone to die in misery and fear, just like Fleur did."

That got a response! LaCroix lifted him bodily, his fist clenched in Nick's jacket. The master vampire's voice was a poisoned whisper. "And you had nothing to do with what happened? Think back, Nicholas. Who was the one who separated us to begin with? Who caused Fleur to run away, looking for something she knew she could never have because of you?"

"Then why this, LaCroix? Why do you want to torment this poor child, who has no defense against you? Killing her would be kinder than this deliberate punishment!"

LaCroix let him down suddenly, once more in control.

"It's not just because of her, Nicholas, although the novelty of this particular seduction appeals to my jaded senses. You play a part in this as well."

"What is this all about, LaCroix?" Nick demanded.

"Nicholas, this story gets even better. Arielle is Fleur's descendant. Didn't you recognize the necklace?"

The smile on LaCroix's face was triumphant. Nicholas knew that nothing could have hurt him more than that at that particular moment. LaCroix had somehow manufactured a revenge that would compensate him for the loss of Fleur. He would slowly destroy the only living link to the woman he had once loved, and in the process would tear out a piece of Nicholas. He must have been planning this for centuries.

"So you'll avenge yourself by destroying Arielle."

LaCroix said nothing, his half-smile silent.

Nick closed his eyes, aware again of the old grief of not meeting LaCroix's expectations and ultimately becoming the cause of LaCroix's eternal unhappiness. He had failed LaCroix, he had failed Fleur and he had betrayed himself. He felt the burning in his throat, the memory of LaCroix's one and truly profound punishment resurrected once more. Why did LaCroix want him back, when he hated him so much?

LaCroix's smile was enigmatic. "I don't hate you, Nicholas. I could never do that. I despise what you did to the relationship I had with Fleur, and I will probably never forgive you for it, but I don't hate you. You are mine, Nicholas, and you always will be. Despite what I shall do to you."

"Is there any way you would consider stopping this insanity, LaCroix?"

"Anything is possible, Nicholas. If my price is met."

"What would keep you from doing this?" Nick asked tiredly, knowing the vampire had him between a rock and a hard place.

"That you come back to me, Nicholas. Forever."

"I can't live like that again, LaCroix. It would destroy me, because I can't believe what you do."

"You only say that because you refuse to acknowledge what you are. It's so simple, Nicholas, if you would only stop fighting yourself. This is what you are, accept it, and go on. Your quest for eternal redemption is an illusion perpetuated by human theology. You will never become mortal. You will never be 'cured' of your disease. This is your immortality." His blue eyes blazed, catching Nicholas up in them, as he always had before. The master vampire's voice was a cool wind across his mind.

"'I am the resurrection and the life. He whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die'," LaCroix quoted, the blasphemous words dark and seductive. His power had grown since they had been apart, and Nicholas feared that one day he would be unable to resist it. Then what would LaCroix do to him, once he regained the prodigal son?

"It's up to you, Nicholas. You come back to me, or the girl is mine. Believe me, I will make the most of that should you decide against my offer."

With that, the master vampire disappeared in the night, leaving Nicholas cold and alone.

Nick had been preoccupied the last few days, and he looked very troubled when he was watching her. She wondered if he had been arguing with LaCroix, for she sensed some helpless frustration in him. She had to leave before things got out of control. She would miss Nick dreadfully, but she could not afford to play the little games LaCroix was insistent on. She didn't want to see Nick hurt anymore.

Unbeknownst to Arielle, Stan had been let out on bail. She was at the house, packing her things, the thought of leaving her only friend heavy in her heart. Nick did not know she had snuck out to get her few personal belongings in order to leave the city, for she planned to get as far away from LaCroix as possible. She did not hear Stan enter the house, and when he suddenly appeared in the bedroom doorway, she screamed. He struck her once and she lost consciousness. When she came to, she found herself on the roof of an abandoned building. Stan ranted about how she was to blame for her mother's death and how he was now going to kill her.

He was totally out of control as he punched and kicked her. Blood spurted from her nose and mouth, and she could feel her ribs cracking under his kicks. The injuries he inflicted over the next endless minutes were horrific. Never had she known so much pain. She knew then that she was going to die. She bled continuously from a large gash in her side that resulted from being thrown against the metal edge of an air-conditioning duct. She grew colder and colder as her life ebbed away. If only the pain would leave, then it would be all right to sink down into the dark. She had a vague regret that she wouldn't see Nick again, but then the pain drowned out even that.

Both were unaware of the tall pale man who erupted from the shadows. Then suddenly Stan was thrown off to the side. She looked up to see LaCroix slashing fangs into the neck of his victim, then letting him fall in a lifeless heap. Just then another figure landed on the roof. He had been flying, Arielle realized numbly. She now realized that what LaCroix meant about his 'religion' was more than just a minor theological difference.

She was looking up into Nick's concerned face the next instant. How they had found her she would never know. Her face was so disfigured that he could not recognize anything but her eyes.

She could barely speak. Nick could hear her faint heartbeat and knew that she was in terrible pain. "Please, Nick, please help me, it hurts so bad." Her breathing grew more labored. She would never make it to the hospital alive, even if he flew. He could not save her. Perhaps if he could reach her mind, he could will the pain away, and let her slip away peacefully.

Oh Arielle, I should have gotten here sooner...then his thoughts were distracted by a soft sound on the rooftop behind him. He turned to see the tall pale-haired master vampire. He strode over to Nicholas as he gazed at the young woman who lay dying before him.

"It took the man quite some time to bring her to this state. He paid for his folly."

Nick then noticed the broken body of Arielle's stepfather lying thirty feet away. "Her pulse grows weak, Nicholas."

He stared at the older vampire, at a complete loss as to his motives. What did LaCroix want?

"I'm sorry, Arielle," Nick whispered to her. "I would have stopped him if I could."

LaCroix looked to the pair huddled on the ground, Nicholas cradling the dying young woman. Nick stared deep into her eyes, murmuring the words he had used as a physician during the Civil War. "You do not feel the pain. You do not feel the pain..."

She shuddered, her breath rattling, but then calmed. With tremendous effort, she reached up to touch his face, her eyes expressing what her voice and facial expressions couldn't. Then she looked over at LaCroix, who was waiting and watching intently. Confused, she felt an odd sensation as she looked at him. "Lucien," she choked out and LaCroix's eyes blazed in triumph. She murmured something else, vaguely familiar, but incomprehensible.

Before Nick could assimilate it, LaCroix lifted him bodily and threw him from her. He snatched her up and slit his wrist, forcing her to drink his blood.

"No!" Nicholas yelled, rushing toward the older vampire. LaCroix felt Nicholas grab him from behind, trying to stop the final abomination, but was thrown off again. Nick watched in horror as LaCroix sank his fangs into her neck and drained her. When Nick regained his feet, Arielle lay like a broken doll, and he watched in numb disbelief as her injuries began to heal. The wounds closed and the bruises faded, until she had no outward sign of injury. She now slept peacefully, and would waken as a vampire. LaCroix laid Arielle down carefully, and then turned to face the younger vampire. Nicholas, so overwhelmed with fury that he was blinded, rushed for his throat. The battle raged for a while, until Nick's anger was replaced with grief, and then the master vampire pressed his advantage. Nick found himself pinned to the wall, unable to move.

"Why, LaCroix?" Nicholas's voice sounded lost.

"It's as I hoped and suspected, Nicholas. I know now that she truly *is* Fleur."

Nick closed his eyes, blood tears burning behind the lids. LaCroix had finally gone mad. "She's not Fleur, LaCroix. Fleur died seven hundred years ago."

"Oh, but she *is*, Nicholas. I never told Arielle my first name."

At that, Nicholas recalled what he had heard her say after uttering LaCroix's name. He realized now that she had spoken in the ancient French dialect no living human would remember. Too late, he recalled LaCroix's oblique reference to legends of immortality. LaCroix had somehow known that Fleur would find her way back to him. If Nick had any doubts about reincarnation, this laid them firmly to rest. Nick shuddered. He had found his sister again after all these years, and had failed her. This time, LaCroix had won not only one soul, but two. Nick had condemned his sister to a living hell. Or was it Arielle he had sent into damnation?

"Do you think she'll remember what happened in the past?" Nick pointed out as he tried to free himself from the master vampire's grip.

"Perhaps, perhaps not, but I have no doubt she'll make a splendid vampire, with my guidance."

"And as your slave," Nick said bitterly. "Do you think Fleur would have chosen this? Would she have still loved you after finding out what this existence really is?"

"Perhaps not then, but this is Arielle now. She understands the darkness and she will embrace it."

"Do you love her, LaCroix?"

The older vampire smiled, and for once he seemed free of malice. "That would be telling, Nicholas. Let's just say that this time I won't give her up. She is mine, just as you are."

Nick backed up warily. "No, LaCroix, I told you I'm not coming back."

"Of course you will, Nicholas. If only to keep an eye on Arielle. Who knows what I'll do to her if you're not around to save her?"

They heard a light stirring noise, and walked over to Arielle who sat up and stared at them half-curious, half-afraid. She looked at Nick and LaCroix, then down at herself. "Nobody can heal people like this. What are you?"

Nick hesitated, torn between the honest answer that she undoubtedly deserved, and a convenient lie. She stared at them, recalling the hypnotic glance, the way LaCroix had seemed to levitate and fly and the blood that she had drunk. It seemed impossible. Her thoughts were visible to both vampires, as were the questions in her eyes.

Nick sighed as he read her thoughts. "We're vampires, Arielle."

"No!" she choked out, and swallowed convulsively, not understanding. "What's happened to me?"

Nick looked sorrowful. "I'm afraid you're now one of us, Arielle. LaCroix has brought you across. You're now bound to him."

She stared uncomprehendingly at Nick, not willing to accept his words.

Nick sighed again. "It's true, Arielle. It's real, not like in books and movies. LaCroix and I, and Janette, are vampires. Undead. Nosferatu. Whatever you would like to call us. I tried to stop him, Arielle. Please believe me that I tried."

It was all a bad dream, she reassured herself. None of this was real, and she would wake up in Nick's apartment and laugh over this. But it didn't go away. She watched as the taller man moved closer to her. LaCroix's eyes glowed red and she saw his fangs. Then the apparition was gone, and all she saw was a tall, slightly sinister man. She swallowed again and looked at her unblemished limbs. This was impossible to believe, but she recognized the truth. LaCroix had been tempting her with the supernatural, she realized, as his references to things in the dark became clear. Only now he had taken the decision from her. Was it because she had been dying?

They had always seemed more than human, so why not vampires? Her father had been fond of quoting Shakespeare, and one of his tidbits, about more things in heaven and earth, came to mind. This explained the power she sensed in both men, though she could not fathom why Nick seemed to radiate such anguish. It wasn't his fault that LaCroix had done this.

LaCroix reached down to help her up, his eyes narrowed as she flinched away from his touch. He caught her by the arms and pulled her up to her feet. His arms went around her, holding her securely. It may have been a solicitous gesture from someone else, but from him it was a symbol of his control over her.

She stared around her, confused by the noises of the night that now threatened to deafen her. Wincing, she held her hands to her ears, trying to block the cacophony. The vampire passed his hand lightly over her head to mute the sound to a tolerable level. He didn't even have to think about what he did. His power came to him so casually that Arielle grew frightened once more. When she had thought of him as a mortal he had terrified her, but as a vampire...

Arielle swallowed again. "This is what you meant by going with you. I didn't have a choice, did I?"

"No, Arielle. There was only my choice."

"Why did you do this, Mr. LaCroix?" The polite form of address seemed almost ludicrous under the circumstances.

LaCroix was amused. "Because I wanted to," he stated simply.

"A-and now?" she stuttered.

LaCroix just smiled. There was nothing comforting in it. A long silence passed, and Arielle waited for the ultimatum.

"Will you come with me now, Arielle?" LaCroix asked, although it could not really be called a request.

Arielle stared back at the older vampire, and back to Nicholas. Nick had been trying to get away from a *vampire*, even though he was one himself. Nick had broken free for his sanity, and she owed Nicholas more than she could say. LaCroix would tear him from his new life without a thought. She could not let it happen again. *He had helped her once before...*

She looked up at the vampire who was holding her, the dizzying blend of terror and longing enveloping her once more. Her stepfather's broken body was a silent testimony to what had taken place. She knew for a fact that it had been LaCroix who had killed him in the end.

She looked up again at LaCroix. "I'll go with you, Mr. LaCroix, but you have to promise to leave Nick alone and that you won't hurt him or interfere with him or his friends."

LaCroix smiled coldly at that. "I don't think you're in a position for bargaining, Arielle."

She looked at him beseechingly, knowing she would not be able to blackmail LaCroix into anything. She could only appeal to his mercy, what there was of it. LaCroix's face softened in spite of himself.

"Agreed, Arielle. You'll do my bidding, and Nicholas won't be bothered...much."

"No, Arielle!" Nick shouted, but neither of them acknowledged his protest.

Arielle was intent on reading LaCroix's face. It was probably the best deal she would get from the vampire, so she nodded quickly. LaCroix then idly traced the artery in her neck, pausing to bend his head and let his teeth touch it, then withdrew. It was another power display to Nick, one that infuriated the younger vampire to the point where he blurted out, "You don't have to do this, Arielle!"

She smiled at Nick somewhat tremulously. "Yes, I do, Nick." She gathered her courage as she looked at LaCroix. "I won't kill," she whispered.

"Arielle," he said, his smile truly terrifying. "You'll do anything I say."

His grip on her tightened, and he bent down to slash into her throat with his fangs. She cried out in pain as he drank from her, weakening her further. Tears ran down her face as the pain continued on for an intolerable, indefinite period, then abruptly stopped.

"That was your first lesson, Arielle. Any disobedience will be punished. Nicholas learned all about that."

Nick flew at the older vampire, only to be almost casually rebuffed. He got to his feet, shaking his head to clear it. LaCroix supported Arielle in his arms. She drooped against his chest like an exhausted child, crying silently. LaCroix absently reached up to wipe the blood tears from her face.

Nick choked on his anger. How could he have thought that the memory of LaCroix's love for Fleur would keep him from hurting the delicate newborn vampire? LaCroix smiled as he read the thoughts in his eyes. "Oh, come, come, Nicholas. You know that all children must be taught to obey. She must learn to survive as a creature of the night in uncertain times. Disobedience could mean destruction."

LaCroix was right, of course. Arielle would have to learn quickly, and she would be totally dependent for a long time on her master to teach her the skills for surviving in the mortal world. Nick would have argued that such extreme

discipline was not necessary, but knew that he could not dictate how LaCroix would treat her. She belonged totally to LaCroix, and he could do with her as he pleased.

"No mirrors, LaCroix," Nick said in a tight, choked voice. He tried not to lose control of his emotions and he was unwilling to beg.

At that, the master vampire's face softened slightly, and he reached over to touch Nicholas's hair with something close to gentleness. "No mirrors, Nicholas, that I will promise." Nick closed his eyes, the touch bringing back the better times he had experienced with LaCroix. That closeness they had experienced, father to son, before Fleur. He still missed it, even though he knew they could never regain it.

LaCroix looked at him oddly, then smiled again. "We will, Nicholas, when the time is right." Nick looked away, wanting and dreading that reunion.

Arielle was confused by the exchange, not understanding what the conversation was about. She felt weak, and hungry, although she couldn't say for what. She was also more than a little frightened of what had just occurred. LaCroix was going to make Stan look like Dr. Seuss. The vampires were engrossed in the moment, not noticing the female figure that landed gracefully on the roof. She walked toward them with a bottle.

"Janette," LaCroix nodded. "How good of you to come to the family reunion."

She stared at Arielle, finally understanding what LaCroix had planned all along. She had received his mental summons with puzzlement, wondering why he wished to meet her on an abandoned building and to bring a bottle of her best vintage.

"You really are without pity, LaCroix," she said in acid tones.

The master vampire acknowledged her with a mocking bow.

"Here," she said abruptly. "Let her drink, it's almost dawn now."

LaCroix took the bottle, unholy amusement in his eyes, and uncorked casually with his teeth. Arielle's eyes got even rounder, and she tried to back away from him, but he held her still.

"Drink, Arielle. This is what will sustain you now."

She gazed at the bottle contents, the incredible hunger warring with horror.

"It's blood!"

Janette's lips twitched a bit at the corners. "Don't worry, Arielle, it's no one you know."

Arielle felt the warning pressure of LaCroix's hand on her shoulder, and drank. The ecstasy of the taste overwhelmed her. She downed half the bottle, then stopped, stricken. Her eyes were glistening suspiciously, but she didn't cry. The tall vampire beside her watched with amused indulgence. She would be just as much of a challenge as Nicholas has been, still was, for that matter. And eventually,

when he grew less indulgent, Nicholas and Janette would join him again. It was only a matter of time.

Nick and Janette received that message quite clearly. LaCroix handed the bottle back to Janette after drinking a bit himself. Arielle looked dazed, then extremely sad.

"Good-bye, Nicholas. Good-bye, Janette. Will I see you again?"

The two vampires looked at her helplessly. Arielle noted the unspoken message by their expressions and looked up at the master vampire.

"No promises, Arielle. It will all depend on you. You'll have to work very hard to please me, won't you?" LaCroix murmured in her ear.

Arielle bent her head, rebellious but cowed. LaCroix was satisfied. The brother and the sister were not so unalike.

He gathered up the young vampire, holding her securely with one arm as he prepared to fly away. "Farewell, Nicholas. You must forgive my haste, but I have many things to accomplish. As always, Janette, it's been a pleasure."

LaCroix's hold on Arielle was almost gentle now, and Nick hoped against hope that the master vampire would show some kindness to her. LaCroix looked down at the tiny pale figure he cradled. "It's time to go, Arielle."

She turned her face into his shoulder and yielded to his wishes.

Nicholas stared hard at the older vampire. "I'll be watching you, LaCroix."

"That's my line, Nicholas," and he flew away in a rush of wind.

Nicholas stared at the corpse and then reluctantly called the report into headquarters via his portable phone.

"Well, we had better get back before sunrise, Janette." Nick sounded almost defeated. Janette was worried.

"Did she mean so much to you, Nikola?"

"She's Fleur, Janette. Fleur came back in her."

For a moment, Janette was blank, then her eyes widened. "Surely you don't mean that..."

"Yes, Janette. She knew his first name without him telling her. And she spoke in the old dialect. No living mortal knows it today."

"Reincarnation, Nikola? Do you really believe that?"

"We exist, Janette. So how can you doubt that Fleur could come back?"

She looked stunned, then intrigued. "No wonder he was so drawn to her."

"I failed her, Janette, I failed her before and she died. Now I have condemned her to a fate worse than death."

Janette clutched a fistful of his shirt, her eyes flashing. "Don't you dare think that way, Nikola. You knew it would have to be her choice."

"But she did it to spare me!"

"And you are not worthy of such a sacrifice? Would you deny Fleur the right to protect her brother?"

"She gets nothing from this, Janette. He will destroy her."

"Are you certain? Surely he must feel something for her. You know he loved Fleur."

"You always hurt the one you love," Nick said with a bitter laugh. "You don't really think that he's going to wax poetic and put her on a pedestal?"

"No, Nikola, you and I both know him too well to expect that. Fleur has been an obsession with him for years, and now that he has her back, I hope he will be kind. He can be, if you remember."

"For a price, Janette, you know it's always for a price." He was silent for a few moments, then spoke again in a low voice, "He'll come back for us, Janette. You know he'll rip us out of whatever life we have when he decides to get us back. So what good did Arielle really do by agreeing to go with him?"

"I don't know, Nikola. I just don't know."

Nick enveloped Janette in his arms and held her very close. She offered him what comfort she could. They stood for several long minutes, each absorbed in their own thoughts.

"We must go, Nikola, the sun is nearly here." Janette smiled sadly at him, wanting to comfort him, but uncertain how.

They flew off in different directions. Nick made it into his apartment in the last few seconds before sunrise. He rode up in the elevator, angry and depressed. He entered the apartment to see Natalie curled up on his couch, King Kong playing on his VCR. She sniffled into her popcorn, then looked up at him.

"Hi, Nick," she said quietly. "I just had the feeling that something bad was going to happen tonight."

He settled down next to her, leaning back with a weary sigh. "It did, Nat. Arielle's stepfather found Arielle and beat her nearly to death. LaCroix found them and killed him. Then I arrived and it got ugly."

Natalie looked stunned, then angry. "Is she...?"

"No, she's not dead. It's much worse than that."

Nat looked shocked. "He made her a vampire?" Then she asked sympathetically, "What happened, Nick?"

"LaCroix found out that Arielle is the descendant of Fleur's illegitimate child, only she's more than that. She actually *is* Fleur."

"Reincarnation?" Natalie yelped. "How could that be?"

"Anything is possible, Nat, and it's most definitely true. She was almost dead when she recognized us. I mean, Fleur did. Her spirit or ghost from seven hundred years ago."

"Did he know about Fleur before this?"

Nick nodded. "He suspected, and that's why he came after her. He offered to leave her alone if I went back to him, and gave me some time to think about it. Only her stepfather tried to kill her, and LaCroix intervened. He probably planned to take her all along. He said he wanted me back, but Arielle offered to go with him in my place. She sacrificed herself for me. The worst thing is, he may get me back anyway."

Then the whole story came pouring out, including the ominous threat about bringing Janette and himself back into the fold when LaCroix was ready. All Nick's concerns about LaCroix's possible abuse of Arielle and his own experiences throughout the long association with LaCroix came to light. Nick talked until he couldn't speak anymore, and Natalie listened in silence, curled up close to him.

"We'd better get you human before LaCroix decides to come back for you."

Natalie looked determined, bristling with indignation and anger for how Nick had been treated. She loved him all the more for what he was trying to overcome.

Nick stared at Natalie, gratified by her support. "It's all so complicated," he choked. "Now I'll have to worry every minute about her."

"No, Nick, you will worry about your life and you'll worry about yourself. The rest is in God's hands." She held him tightly, stroked his hair, and tried to comfort him.

Nick's voice was resigned. "No, Nat, it's in LaCroix's hands. I don't think even God could help her now."

Natalie was silent, but her eyes spoke for her, her love for him an eloquent expression. They were racing against time now, but one thing was clear, she loved him. And he loved her. Surely that would count for something?

Nick lay back against the sofa, pulling Natalie close to his chest and holding her tightly. *I'll be ready to face you, LaCroix. You won't take me away from Nat. This time, you won't win.*

He could feel the vampire's presence from a distance. LaCroix's thoughts touched his mind almost lazily. *Soon, Nicholas. Ssleep well and dream, for it won't be long.*

Nicholas shuddered, and Natalie hugged him closer, trying to dispel his fear. They slept then, uneasily, unaware of the pale figure that glimpsed at them through the skylight and smiled before flying off into the night.

Chapter Eight

LaCroix stood in the cemetery with Arielle as she carefully arranged the flowers on her mother's and father's graves. This had been the last request she had made, and LaCroix had been willing to indulge her. He had taken her to his house and she had fallen asleep on his luxurious pale cream colored couch. The first day he had done nothing except let her rest, and then produced blood for her. He had been almost kind, and Arielle didn't know what to make of it. She belonged to him now, and he would never care for her like the woman he loved in the past. It was ironic, that she would escape one hell to reach another. They stood before the freshly turned earth and stared at Arielle's last link with mortality. There was no going back.

She knelt at the grave and wept silently. LaCroix stood beside her, his face calm and expressionless. Then she rose, turned to the vampire who stood so impassively. LaCroix's eyes burned with possessiveness, and she suppressed a shudder. LaCroix watched her, his memories taking him back to when Fleur had looked at him with her loving eyes. He saw Fleur's face in front of him, asking an unspoken question. This was the first time he had felt her spirit so close to him. He had followed the shade throughout the centuries until it led him to Arielle, and now it waited for his answer. He sighed mentally.

I can't change my nature, Fleur. That is what Nicholas was protecting you from. He knew me better than he thought. You saw a small bit of good in me, but there is much more in me that is not. I loved you, but not the gentle love you had hoped for. I cannot ever be your perfect knight.

The spirit seemed to waver a bit, still seeking an answer.

I love you still, Fleur. You were too delicate then to survive this life, but now, perhaps now, you will be strong enough. I cannot live without you anymore. Will you choose this time to stay, knowing what this life will be?

LaCroix felt the touch of gentle acceptance and love that had been so much of Fleur's charm, then her shade faded away, leaving only the echo of her thoughts.

LaCroix looked again at Arielle. She, too, had sensed a presence. Then it was gone. Perhaps she had only imagined it. LaCroix's gentle expression, so at odds with his usual behavior, had been wiped away. He once more looked dark and dangerous. She was full of unspoken questions and fears. He read her thoughts easily. His smile was enigmatic.

"Are you wondering what happens now, Arielle?" His voice was lightly mocking and close to her ear as he stood just behind her. His hands rested on her shoulders with deceptive lightness.

She nodded mutely, for in truth, she didn't know what to expect from him. LaCroix pulled her back against him. His lips touched her neck, his fangs lightly scraping her skin, all the while registering the frantic terror mixed with helpless attraction. He exulted in the darker emotions running underneath the love he felt for Fleur. Now he could express all his feelings freely.

"Have you ever wondered how one vampire seduces another? Tonight, Arielle, you will fly with me."

She turned to look into his eyes, drowning once more in the blue depths. She was unable to answer as he lifted her with him into the night sky, unaware of anything except LaCroix. The wind rushed by them as he felt his anticipation grow. *Ah, Fleur, my darling, you are mine now.*

His voice touched lightly across her mind. "You've given your soul to me, Arielle. You must ask yourself, was it worth the price?"

*'La Belle Morte' by Conrad Aiken

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